Teaching Students with Special Educational Needs: Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions.

Tiffany Banner
Murdoch University
2014

Presented as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Research) of Murdoch University 2014
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

........................................
(Tiffany Banner)
Abstract

The current educational policy of educating students with special educational needs in regular schools has created a new classroom environment for teachers. Inclusive classrooms involve teachers dealing with a larger diversity of students in their classrooms and differentiating the curriculum to meet the wide range of student backgrounds, cognitive abilities, physical needs and interests.

The purpose of this interpretive study was to investigate and understand pre-service teachers’ perceptions about their preparedness for teaching students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms, and to identify aspects that may support their success and confidence. The participants were 20 pre-service and beginning teachers. Data were collected over a two-year period through individual interviews with pre-service teachers and small focus groups with beginning teachers using semi-structured and open-ended questions to allow for depth of discussion.

The analysis of the data revealed that there are many connected aspects such as teachers’ perceptions, experience and background which appear to work together to influence their attitude towards students with special educational needs and their perceptions of these students. Teachers’ perceptions about their preparation for teaching students with special educational needs were found to relate to their attitude towards teaching inclusively.

These findings suggest a link between pre-service and beginning teachers’ perceptions and their attitudes towards students with special educational needs. The practical implications for beginning teacher education and preparation programs as well as the inclusion of students with special educational needs are discussed. A suggestion highlighted for preparation programs was to provide opportunities for teachers to develop a repertoire of teaching and management strategies and how they can be effectively used to benefit students with special educational needs. The implications not only reflect the theoretical effects but the broader translation of these recommendations into the classroom practice and the academic context.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the guidance and the help of several individuals who in one way or another contributed and extended their valuable assistance in the preparation and completion of this study.

I would like to thanks my supervisors, Dr Susan McKenzie for her help and guidance through the rigorous demands of writing and her knowledge of the requirements and necessary techniques to produce this work and Associate Professor Judy MacCallum for the attention to the conventions necessary to write this thesis and her patience and tireless support. Acknowledgements must also go to the valuable contributions of Associate Professor Jennifer De-Reuck for assistance, expertise, understanding and kindness when most needed and Dr Susan Ledger for providing advice and support throughout this process.

I thank the teachers and students who participated in my research. I appreciate their generosity with their trust, time and willingness to be involved. Their candid and honest views provided much material for reflection.

I would also like to thank my friends and family for the moral support and assistance they provided me through my life and in particular, I must acknowledge my children Thomas, Isabella and Nicholas for their inspiration and the sacrifices they have made to allow me the time and opportunity to complete this project. I have great admiration and gratitude for them all.

Most of all, I owe my deepest heartfelt appreciation and gratitude to my best friend, Andrew Kocsis, whose enthusiasm, support, encouragement, editing assistance, humour and faith in my ability has helped me to achieve the impossible.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. i
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................. ii

**Chapter 1 Introduction** ....................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 1
  1.2 Inclusive education and its historical context .................................................. 2
  1.3 Teacher perceptions and attitudes .................................................................. 8
  1.4 Purpose and Significance of the Study ............................................................... 9
  1.5 Structure of the thesis ....................................................................................... 12

**Chapter 2 Literature Review** ............................................................................... 14
  2.1 Teachers’ Beliefs about Teaching and Learning from a General Education Context
  2.2 Teachers’ Attitudes about Inclusion and the Impact they have on Students with Special Needs
  2.3 Teachers’ Attitudes toward Inclusion of Students with Special Needs
  2.4 Beginning Teachers Attitudes toward the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs
  2.5 Aspects Related to Beginning Teachers’ Attitudes toward Inclusion of Students with Special Needs
  2.6 Teachers’ perceptions and their impact on students with special educational needs
  2.7 Preparation of Beginning Teachers
  2.8 Conclusions ...................................................................................................... 48

**Chapter 3 Methodology** ...................................................................................... 52
  3.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 52
  3.2 Research Question ............................................................................................ 53
  3.3 Identification of the methodology ..................................................................... 54
  3.4 Ethical Guidelines ............................................................................................. 56
  3.5 Researcher Bias ................................................................................................ 57
  3.6 Selection of participants ................................................................................... 60
  3.7 Sources of Data ............................................................................................... 61
  3.8 Procedure .......................................................................................................... 65
3.9 Data Analysis .......................................................................................................................... 67
3.10 The Data Analysis Themes ..................................................................................................... 69
3.11 Validity and Reliability .......................................................................................................... 75
3.12 Limitations ............................................................................................................................ 76

Chapter 4 Findings of the Study ................................................................................................. 77
4.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 77
4.2 Discussion of Themes ............................................................................................................. 80
4.3 Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 102

Chapter 5 Discussions and Conclusion .................................................................................... 105
5.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 105
5.2 Limitations of the Study ......................................................................................................... 113
5.3 Implications and Recommendations for Tertiary Teacher Education ............................. 115
5.4 Implications and Recommendations for Schools ............................................................... 123
5.5 Implications and Recommendations for Induction Programmes ..................................... 127
5.6 Recommendations for Future Research ............................................................................... 131
5.7 Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 133

References ..................................................................................................................................... 135

Appendix A Interview Guide ......................................................................................................... 156
Appendix B Letter to Participants ............................................................................................... 157
Appendix C Focus Group Guide ................................................................................................. 158

List of Tables and Figures:

Figure 1. The Research Theme and Questions. ............................................................................. 54
Figure 2. The Aspects of Preparedness Influencing Teacher Attitudes. ..................................... 79
Table 1. Themes from the Data ..................................................................................................... 70
Chapter 1 Introduction

What is clearly important is that pre-service teacher training must consider the attitudes, beliefs and concerns of teachers in training and ensure that their courses provide the most appropriate preparation to better enable them to be prepared for inclusive education. (Sharma, Forlin, Loreman & Earle, 2006, p.90)

1.1 Introduction

My professional experiences working with students who require teaching and learning adjustments in inclusive school settings and being involved in pre-service teacher education led me to question beginning teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness to teach inclusively. From my professional experience as a Consultant Teacher, I observed that teachers with positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs seemed more able to provide opportunities and practice in their class to enhance individual student performances and feelings of success. Alternatively, teachers with negative attitudes appeared less able to include the student with special educational needs effectively and often seemed to get frustrated by the amount of effort or work required to include the student in the classroom environment. I was interested in effective ways to prepare pre-service teachers to cater effectively for all students, including those with special educational needs, in inclusive settings. My experience in the area of students with special educational needs comes from teaching experiences, university education and specialist instruction in this field. In the course of this work, I observed that many teachers appeared to have difficulty successfully including
students with special educational needs in their classrooms. These observations and experiences, therefore, provoked my desire to understand teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and aspects that may affect their attitudes.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research study. The concept of inclusive education is introduced, followed by the historical context and contemporary issues surrounding the implementation of inclusive education. Teachers’ perceptions about their preparedness to teach inclusively and beginning teachers’ attitudes towards students with diverse needs and abilities are introduced as important areas for investigation.

1.2 Inclusive education and its historical context

Inclusion or inclusive education can be interpreted as the philosophy and practice for educating students with disabilities in general education settings (Bryant, Smith & Bryant, 2008; Salend, 2001). The practice centres on the belief that every child should be an equally respected member of the school. It proposed that students with special educational needs can benefit from learning in a regular classroom, while their peers without special educational needs gain from being exposed to children with diverse characteristics, capacities and personalities (Ruijs & Peetsma 2009). For the purpose of this research, students with special educational needs are defined as those students historically educated in settings away from mainstream classrooms in specialised facilities for students with physical, mental or intellectual disabilities such as education support schools. The inclusion of these students with special educational needs is a
commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend.

Inclusion is about a student’s right to be valued for whom they are, to feel like they belong at the school and are a part of the school culture and community. Providing support and meeting the needs of all students in the school should be seen as an extension of the school’s equal opportunities practice and policy. (Woodcock, Dixon & Tanner, 2013, p.23)

Hence, inclusion of students with special educational needs requires bringing additional services to the child, and implies simply that the child will benefit from being in the class rather than having to keep up with the other students. This is a significant aspect of inclusion, and requires a commitment to move crucial resources to the child with special educational needs rather than placing the child in an isolated setting where services are located (Smith, 2007). Prior to inclusive education, in Western Australia as in many jurisdictions, students with special educational needs were educated in special schools by specialist teachers and mainstream teachers were not required to educate these students. This segregation of students with special educational needs led to the segregation of these students both academically and socially. Teachers interested in teaching students with special educational needs and a career in special education could complete an optional programme at university, often in addition to their teaching degree. Pijl, Meijer and Hegarty (1997) noted that this approach has also affected teachers’ attitudes at school level, leading some teachers to believe that the education of students with special educational needs is the
responsibility of the special education teacher and that these students did or should not belong in mainstream classrooms. Jobling and Moni (2004) also found that some teachers “never imagined (they would) have to teach these children” (p.1) which led to negative attitudes and fear when confronted with students with special educational needs in their classes. In the current educational setting, the reality is much different due to changes in international policy and legislation.

The principles of inclusive education as expressed in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) have influenced legislation and policy internationally. The United Nations’ (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities reiterates the call for the development of inclusive education systems at all levels of education. According to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), for inclusion to be successful, “effective individualized support measures” including “reasonable adjustments” are required (p.17). In Australia the Disability Discrimination Act (Commonwealth, 1992) and the Disability Standards for Education (Commonwealth, 2005) reinforce the right to education of students with special educational needs ‘on the same basis as’ students without special educational needs. This has led to a shift in educational provisions for students with special educational needs and these students now have access to placements in mainstream schools alongside their peers. Even though the Disability Discrimination Act does not specify the setting where students with special educational needs should be educated, there is an expectation that regular classroom teachers would be able to meet the diverse needs of their students including students with special educational needs:
The impression emerges of an education sector undergoing major transition, one that recognizes its shortcomings while continuing to adapt and respond to a significant group of students with special educational needs whose parents seek the educational choice and diversity that is the distinguishing feature of independent schools within Western Australia. (Jenkins, 2005, p.540)

This legislation had a significant impact on the education system and led to the recognition that “all students with disabilities [should] be provided with appropriate instruction in the least restrictive environment possible, which for most would be in the regular classroom” (Booth, Ainscow & Kingston, 2006, p.5). There is now an expectation that all students have access to mainstream schools and inclusive learning environments which means that teachers will have these students with special educational needs in their classrooms and will be required to cater for them.

Educational policies in Western Australia have changed since the Review of Educational Services for Students with Disabilities in Government Schools (WAED, 2004). Inclusion in mainstream classrooms has become a reality for many students since the review and most schools now have a number of students with special educational needs included in their classes. For educators, inclusion means the teaching of an educational curriculum to students of all abilities, interests, backgrounds and cultures in the least restrictive environment. In practice, this means all teachers need to be able to cater for all students at their own levels and respond to the diversity of students in each classroom.
Institutions providing pre-service education to beginning teachers have also been impacted, and all teacher preparation programmes in Western Australia are now required to include at least one compulsory unit on teaching students with special educational needs, although course content varies considerably. Some programs infuse inclusive practice into course work; others have blended or integrated preparation for teachers in early childhood and special education, while still others are developing collaborative teacher education models that provide a systematic unified approach to teacher preparation for inclusive classrooms. Tertiary Institutions are also now required to ensure that beginning teachers have met the National Graduate Standards for Teachers, which include knowledge and skills for inclusive education.

Standards 1.5 and 1.6:

1.5 Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities. Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of strategies for differentiating teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities. 1.6 Strategies to support full participation of students with disability. Demonstrate broad knowledge and understanding of legislative requirements and teaching strategies that support participation and learning of students with disability. (AITSL, 2011, p.6)

Tertiary institutions have needed to undergo important modifications to facilitate these changes and research has been conducted on the aspects of effective teacher education programmes to support the development of inclusive schools (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Kim, 2011; AITSL, 2011).
In the current educational system in Western Australia, there is now the certainty that every classroom will include a student with special educational needs and every teacher will be expected to cater for the diverse needs of these students. For the student with special educational needs to benefit the most from inclusion, it is vital that all teachers, including beginning teachers, are able to teach a wider range of children, including those with varying special educational needs, and to collaborate and plan effectively.

The theory and practical experiences gained at university provide some of the beginning teacher’s learning about students with special needs and may possibly be the only exposure to students with special needs these beginning teachers may have before going out into their own classroom. While their education at university plays such an important role in educating students about inclusive education, “it prepares teachers to begin teaching but cannot possibly provide them with all the knowledge, skills and understandings they will need throughout their careers” (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 1998 p.7). As Yandell and Turvey (2007) acknowledged, expectations dramatically shift at the time of employment:

There is a world of difference between the roles occupied by student teachers and what is expected of even the newest of newly qualified teachers, who are expected to participate fully in the practice of the school and the department from the first day of their employment: they have their own timetable, their own classes, their own workload that is, at the least, 90 per cent of that of more experienced colleagues. (p.547)
It is therefore important to identify the perceptions of beginning teachers in order to identify ways to effectively support them in their transition from university to their own classroom.

1.3 Teacher perceptions and attitudes

Teacher attitude has been identified as one of the most influential variables in many aspects from the success of teaching children with special educational needs (Bacon & Schultz, 1991), to the life quality of people with disabilities (Beckwith & Mathews, 1994), and in the success or failure of the integration of students with special educational needs into the regular classroom (Hastings & Oakford, 2003; Stewart, 1990). A number of writers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Westwood & Graham, 2003) agree that for the concept inclusion to be successful, development of positive attitudes toward children with special needs is of equal importance to the development of teachers’ abilities and competencies. A teacher’s perceptions and attitude towards inclusion will affect the environment of a classroom and the success of their students.

Pearson (2009) states that teacher education is a context in which changes in attitudes, beliefs and values can and do occur. Murphy (1996) argues that if pre-service teachers leave teacher preparation institutions with negative attitudes then those attitudes are difficult to change. Atkinson (2004) and Forlin, Loreman, Sharma and Earle (2009) note that if the negative attitudes of pre-service teachers are not addressed during initial teacher education, they may continue to hinder the development of inclusive education in schools. Further, general education teachers
often feel unprepared to teach students with special educational needs (Subban & Sharma, 2006; Winter, 2006).

Since the education received as student teachers and teachers in service can have a profound influence on their beliefs about the nature of the educational enterprise and the appropriateness and effectiveness of different teaching methods (Tooley & Darby, 1998), the development of essential knowledge and strategies in the implementation of inclusive practices is critical during pre-service education.

Thus, teacher education is an important area for research. It is important to understand how pre-service and beginning teachers perceive students with special educational needs. Also of significance are teachers’ perceptions about their preparation for teaching students with special educational needs which impacts on their beliefs and their attitudes towards these students. Finally, it is vital to better understand the impact of the university undergraduate education course on these teacher attitudes as well as to identify the aspects of the course and the teachers’ experiences which were the most beneficial in supporting the success of inclusion for students with special educational needs. This research investigates these important issues related to the successful implementation of inclusive education through an interpretive study using interviews and focus groups.

1.4 Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand pre-service and beginning teachers’ perceptions about their preparedness for teaching students with special educational
needs in mainstream classrooms and identify aspects which may support their success and beliefs in order to support the inclusion of students with special educational needs and the development of positive teacher attitudes towards these students. The implementation of inclusive education is a complex issue that will have to be planned by all responsible for teacher education and on-going teacher support with careful consideration of all connected elements. Determining teachers’ perceptions of preparedness will therefore play a major role in successfully planning the implementation of inclusive education.

The research aims to understand the perceptions of pre-service and beginning teachers and assumes that these perceptions are constructed through interactions and experiences over time. Goertz and LeCompte (1984) noted that educational studies of this nature are often conducted to examine the lives of teachers and students for “unique and common patterns of experience, outlook and response” (p.31). Within this interpretive framework, the research explored the teachers’ perceptions of their preparation in order to provide information about their attitudes and beliefs in relation to students with special educational needs, and direction for development of positive attitudes and support for these teachers and students.

The research reviewed in Chapter 2 reveals a common emphasis of previous literature on the attitudes and beliefs that most teachers have towards the inclusion of students with special needs in the regular education classrooms and what can be done to better prepare teachers and build confidence in their abilities to cater for diversity. The focus of the present research was consequently directed towards understanding the
attitudes and beliefs of beginning teachers and their needs both at the pre-service and school level. In order to identify these areas, it was important to gain an understanding of the perceptions of the teachers before they begin teaching in their own classrooms and teachers in their early practice. The participants selected for this study were eight pre-service teachers at the end of their course, after studies and practical experiences related to students with special educational needs, and a group of twelve newly qualified beginning teachers working in classrooms. Phone interviews were conducted with the eight pre-service teachers and the twelve beginning teachers participated in focus groups responding to the responses and themes raised through the phone interviews.

Research is important in supporting the development of more inclusive teacher education programs and schools as it provides knowledge about inclusive practices and experiences. The current study aimed to contribute to the field of inclusive education by providing information about teachers’ perceptions of preparedness for teaching students with special educational needs from the Western Australian context and their attitudes and beliefs about teaching these students in inclusive schools in order to improve the support for both beginning teachers and students with special educational needs. Given this context, the research may produce knowledge about the effectiveness of the pre-service education course content and provide direction for improvement. In order to provide better learning opportunities for all students, teachers need to be educated to cater for diversity in schools before leaving university
and the knowledge, skills and opportunities they receive should facilitate positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

The study is divided into five chapters. The broad purpose of each is summarised below.

Chapter one introduced the context of the research, outlines the purpose of the study and outlines the structure of the thesis.

Chapter two provides a more detailed review of the literature. It discusses the perceptions of preparedness and attitudes of beginning teachers towards students with special educational needs and their ability to cater for diversity. It then explores the aspects, which contribute to these attitudes, and the consequences that these can have on instructional strategies for students with special educational needs are then reviewed.

Chapter three details the methodology of the study, including the research questions, which were derived from a study of the literature. In this chapter, the research design and development as well as the participants involved are further detailed. The process of the data collection and the preparation of the data set prior to carrying out the formal analysis are also outlined.

Chapter four presents the results of the data collection beginning with the participants involved in the study and their background. It then outlines the results for each of the
components of the study. Relationships between the attitudinal and effective theoretical components are then presented. Finally the chapter presents the impact of the findings on the education of students with special educational needs.

Chapter five discusses the results of the study reported in chapter four and outlines the implications of these findings and the recommendations for teacher education programs, induction programs and schools. The chapter also outlines the aspects identified as crucial components of effective support processes for beginning teachers. The limitations of the study are discusses and areas for future research are identified. The chapter ends with an overall conclusion to the study.
Chapter 2  Literature Review

Chapter Two provides a review of prior research in relation to the issues related to the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms and the preparation of teachers. As teachers’ perceptions and attitudes towards students with diverse needs and abilities have been identified as important aspects in the successful implementation of inclusive education, this literature is reviewed and discussed. Research on teacher preparation is also discussed, especially in relation to attitudes towards teaching students with special needs, and research examining the relationship between the teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, perceptions of preparedness and their perceptions of their ability to teach students with special educational needs successfully in mainstream classrooms.

The context of the research and definition of inclusion was addressed in Chapter One.

This chapter is organised into the following key areas:

• Teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning in general.

• Teachers’ beliefs and attitudes about inclusion of students with special needs.

• Teachers’ attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special needs.

• Beginning teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion.

• Teacher perceptions and their impact on students with special needs.

• Pre-service education and the impact it has on teacher preparedness.
• Aspects of pre-service education or prior knowledge seen as beneficial.

• Relationship between teacher beliefs and skills.

2.1 Teachers’ Beliefs about Teaching and Learning from a General Education Context

Watson (2003) described teaching as an intensely psychological process and believed that a teacher’s ability to maintain effective classroom environments, motivate students, and make appropriate decisions depends on the teacher’s personal qualities and the ability to create personal relationships with students. These effective attitudes and actions employed by teachers ultimately can make a positive difference on the lives of their students. It is known that attitudes have a profound impact on teacher practices and behaviours. Teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about education include the views they have about their students, the learning process, the nature of knowledge, teachers and teaching, and the curriculum. Although many researchers separate beliefs and actions for research purposes, they were aware that these ideas function together (Richardson, 1996). For example, Wallace and King (2004) stated that teacher actions should not be considered as a separate entity from the teacher’s belief system as a whole because these actions represent one aspect of a teacher’s beliefs.

All teachers maintain beliefs about their work, their roles and responsibilities, and the curriculum areas they teach. Teachers differ in the attitudes and beliefs they hold about these aspects due to a number of significant aspects including their prior knowledge, their own educational experiences and their practical teaching experiences (Subban & Sharma, 2005). These attitudes and beliefs shape the way the classroom
progresses on a daily basis because they impact on the expectations that the teacher holds about particular students and affects both what they observe and what they do not notice about students. For example, Elliot (2008) found that teacher beliefs about their roles and responsibilities in working with students with special educational needs influenced both the quantity and quality of their instructional interactions with all students.

These attitudes and beliefs provide a strong link to classroom behaviours and, ultimately, to students’ classroom learning and levels of student success (Brownell & Pajares, 1999; Elliot, 2008). From this perspective, researchers have supported the need for a closer examination of the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and teaching practices (Pajares, 1992; Pomeroy, 1993; Subban & Sharma, 2006). By examining the teacher’s actions and their visible effects, previous research on teaching observed how teacher behaviour influences student achievement. While this research has provided important information, it is now apparent that there needs to be further research into how teachers’ beliefs influence their behaviour in the classroom. Although many researchers separate beliefs and actions for enquiry purposes, they are aware that these concepts work together and recognise that teachers’ thought processes influence their judgements, decisions and, eventually, practices (Richardson, 1996). Wallace and Kang (2004) asserted that teacher behaviours should not be considered as a separate entity from the teacher’s belief system as a whole because these actions represent only one aspect of a teacher’s beliefs. Teachers give value to educational beliefs through their actions in the classroom (Tobin, 1993), and these
behaviours make sense in relation to the teacher’s system of beliefs (Pajares, 1992). Although previous studies that linked teacher beliefs to their actions contributed to our understanding of teachers’ beliefs and practice, there is limited information about the details of how those beliefs inform teachers’ behaviours in the classroom.

Research into beginning teachers’ attitudes and beliefs has revealed that future teachers are optimistic, highly confident, and enthusiastic as they enter teacher education programs (Richardson, 1996; Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1998). Beginning teachers also enter teacher education programs with strong views on teaching acquired during their previous educational and life experiences (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992). Several studies have examined entering student teachers’ beliefs and their effect on learning to teach within a teacher education program (Holt-Reynolds, 1992; MacKinnon & Erickson, 1992; Ross, Johnson & Smith, 1992). Ross, Johnson, and Smith (1992) found that the process of learning to teach was influenced by various complex aspects, including “entering perspectives, personal learning history, theoretical knowledge base, faculty mentors, cooperating teachers, peers, university supervisors, children within the classrooms, student teaching experiences, image itself, and perception of efficacy” (p.34). Among these aspects, the strongest factor that influenced how and what student teachers learned in their teacher education program was their previous perspectives on teaching and learning.

Undoubtedly, it is important to understand beginning and practising teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about inclusive education as part of their overall views about teaching and learning. This understanding is critical given the finding that teachers’
positive attitudes and perspectives toward including students with special needs in their classrooms are essential to successful inclusion (Hasazi, Johnston, Liggett & Schattman, 1994; Wilczenski, 1993; Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000b). The next two sections examine teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and the aspects associated with the development of these attitudes.

2.2 Teachers’ Attitudes about Inclusion and the Impact they have on Students with Special Needs

The literature regarding pre-service and in-service teachers’ attitudes toward the inclusion of students with special needs was reviewed prior to the commencement of this study. Richardson (1996) states, "Attitudes and beliefs are a subset of a group of constructs that name, define, and describe the structure and content of mental states that are thought to drive a person’s actions" (p. 102). Johnson and Howell (2009) state that attitudes are thoughts or ideas that reflect feelings and influence behaviours related to a particular object, and are comprised of three major components: cognitive (i.e., the idea or assumptions upon which the attitude is based), affective (i.e., feelings about the issue), and behavioural (i.e., a predisposition toward an action that corresponds with the assumption or belief) (Wood, 2000). The cognitive element relates to knowledge and thoughts about aspects like the causes of the behaviour of children with special needs in an inclusive setting. The affective element is based on the cognitive understanding of special needs, which can motivate teachers to include the child who has special needs as effectively as possible, or produce feelings that could cause them to exclude the child from regular classroom activities. The
behavioural element deals with a predisposition to act or respond in a particular way when in contact with children who have special needs (e.g., move further away from the child). All three of these components, cognitive, affective, and behavioural, are interrelated and impact on the way in which the beginning teacher perceives the world (Stoneman, 1993). As a result, the formation and modification of teacher attitudes are important areas of education research (Weisman & Garza, 2002). This shows that teachers can form attitudes toward children with special needs, and inclusion, based on a child’s special needs, the child’s characteristics and behaviour, the aspects in the classroom, and their previous experiences. Subsequently, the teachers’ attitudes are reflected in their behaviour in the classroom and in their interactions with the child with special needs (Subban & Sharma, 2005).

According to Bandura (1993), teachers’ attitudes and their beliefs in their efficacy of teaching inclusively may be influenced by their experiences and the success of inclusive classroom education may be influenced by the teachers’ approach and their views towards inclusive education. Consequently, their attitudes are crucial aspects in the success of the student with special needs and the inclusive classroom (Jordan, Schwartz & McGhie-Richmond, 2009). Therefore, it is important to assess the aspects that facilitate the development of beginning teachers’ positive attitudes toward inclusion.

This review highlighted prior research that addresses the following questions: (a) what are the attitudes of teachers and beginning teachers toward inclusion, (b) what aspects are associated with these attitudes, (c) what issues do beginning teachers believe need
to be addressed so that they can be effective teachers in inclusive settings, and (d) how prepared do beginning teachers feel with regard to teaching students with special needs? Before reviewing the literature regarding teacher attitudes toward inclusion, a brief review of the research regarding teachers’ beliefs toward teaching and learning was conducted. This review provided contextual information regarding teacher attitudes and a framework for the subsequent literature review of teacher attitudes toward inclusion of both experienced and beginning teachers.

2.3 Teachers’ Attitudes toward Inclusion of Students with Special Needs

Teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion and students with special needs were found to be a critical factor in supporting inclusive practices (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000a; Bender, Vail & Scott, 1995; Cook, 2001; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Ward, Center & Bochner, 1994). A teacher’s perceptions and attitude towards inclusion will affect the environment of a classroom, adversely placing limitations on the achievements of their students. When teachers are able to acknowledge and realise the impact of their personal views, it will provide them with a better perspective on how to work effectively with students with special needs and assist them in creating a more supportive educational environment (Block, 2000). Subban and Sharma (2005) found that teachers’ attitudes and actions towards inclusive education was significantly influenced by their length of teaching experience, contact with a student with special needs, and perceived support for inclusive education. Subban and Sharma (2005) also found that both principals and teachers were concerned about the lack of resources such as education support teachers and support staff, the lack of availability of
appropriate instructional materials, the lack of funding, and their lack of training to implement inclusive education policies.

Throughout the literature, several aspects were found to be related to teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion. These include (a) teachers’ experience with students with special needs, (b) the nature and severity of the student’s disability, (c) professional in-service education, and (d) school support services (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Many previous studies indicated that teachers with more experience working with students with special needs had considerably more positive attitudes toward inclusion than those with little or no experience (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000a; Cook, Tankersley, Cook & Landrum, 2000; Minke, Bear, Deemer & Griffin, 1996; Subban & Sharma, 2005; Woodcock, 2013). It has been recognised that experienced teachers provide students with special needs in inclusive settings with more teacher praise, encouragement to do their best, opportunities to answer questions, and more carefully monitoring of their performance (Brown, Jones, LaRusso & Aber, 2010; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Some teachers struggle with the concept of inclusion, feeling as though the students with special needs will slow down the progression of the class making it difficult to get through a lesson (Leatherman, 2007).

The student’s characteristics as well as the nature and severity of the student’s disability also appears to be related to the teachers’ willingness to assist students with special needs in mainstream classrooms (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Rainforth, 2000; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996, Byrne & Hennessy, 2009). In their investigation, Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) noted that students with mild disabilities, who require the least
amount of modification in curriculum and instruction in inclusive settings, were given the highest level of support. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) found that the level of severity of a student’s disability and the amount of teacher responsibility required were the two most significant aspects to influence teachers’ perspectives toward inclusion. These two aspects appeared also to be related to the belief that including students with special needs would have a negative effect on the general education classroom. Students with disabilities that were perceived by teachers to bring the most challenges to their daily routines were the students that teachers are least willing to teach. Students with mild disabilities (e.g. students with learning disabilities) have been characterised as not being considerably different from students without distinguished disabilities (Wang, Reynolds & Walberg, 1988) and were, therefore, more likely to be accommodated in the mainstream inclusive classroom (Byrne & Hennessy, 2009). On the other hand, children with intellectual disabilities and students with emotional and behavioural problems have usually been regarded less positively in relation to attitudes about inclusion (Soodak, Podell & Lehman, 1998; Stoiber, Gettinger & Goetz, 1998; Loreman, Sharma, Forlin & Earle, 2005). In general, teachers believe that students with intellectual disabilities and more challenging behaviours will require additional teacher responsibility and are too difficult to support in inclusive classrooms (Avramidis et al, 2000).

Due to the changes that inclusion necessitates in mainstream classrooms, some researchers have linked teachers’ negative responses toward inclusion to the teachers’ lack of positive experiences with effective inclusion programs (McLeskey, Waldron, So,
Swanson & Loveland, 2001). McLeskey and colleagues (2001) sought to compare the perspectives of teachers who were not working in inclusive settings at the time of the investigation with those who were working in well-designed inclusion programs. The results indicated that teachers in well-designed inclusion programs had considerably more positive attitudes and perspectives toward inclusion compared to teachers who lacked this experience. Practical education for teachers was also found to positively influence their attitudes toward inclusion. Research indicated that teachers who had education to teach students with special needs showed more positive attitudes toward inclusion compared to their colleagues who had no specialist education (Avramidis et al., 2000; Barr & Bracchitta, 2008).

Practical teaching experiences impact not only on the teacher’s attitudes and beliefs but also on the confidence beginning teachers have in their ability to accommodate students with special needs. Ammah and Hodge (2005) found that teachers do not believe that they are adequately prepared to contend with the intricacies of inclusion and identified the pre-service years as the crucial stage to positively shape the attitudes of teachers. Walker and Nabuzoba (2007) also found that teachers’ perception of success in dealing with children with special needs was the single most potent predictor of general education teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion. Through the modification of teacher education programs to build confidence and acceptance within the classroom it may be possible to reduce misconceptions about inclusion. University preparation courses need to positively shape the attitudes of teachers towards inclusion through practical education and positive experiences of inclusion in
order for these teachers to feel more confident and prepared for inclusive classrooms. Providing teachers with strategies through university on how to make modifications and differentiate the existing general education curriculum can be an effective way to create an inclusive learning environment that is accessible to all students in a variety of educational contexts (Ammah & Hodge, 2005; Hodge, 1998). There were also concerns in the research about school contexts playing a major role in the development of teacher attitudes towards students with special needs.

The research also found that aspects within the school and community can significantly impact on teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion. McNally, Cole and Waugh (2001) indicated that teachers who were concerned about including students with special needs in their general education classrooms lacked confidence in their instructional skills and the quality of support services available at the classroom and school levels. Similarly, Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) reported that teachers believed that there were not sufficient resources available to support inclusion efforts, although more teachers agreed they were provided physical support than agreed they had adequate human support. Insufficient classroom preparation time available for teachers in inclusive classrooms was another concern of teachers identified in the research. Similarly, although Downing, Eichinger and Williams (1997) found generally positive perceptions toward inclusion, they also indicated that teachers were concerned about the classroom and preparation time required to support students with special needs that might limit their ability to provide an appropriate education for general students in the inclusive classroom.
These concerns clearly raise questions about the competencies and skills needed by teachers to teach effectively in inclusive classrooms. They also raise concerns about preparation in teacher education programs and how these programs affect beginning teachers’ perspectives toward inclusion. The next section highlights research about the general attitudes of beginning teachers toward inclusion and aspects related to the formation of these attitudes.

2.4 Beginning Teachers Attitudes toward the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs

Understanding the attitudes of teachers and beginning teachers is critical in order to improve their teaching practices and professional preparation (Pajares, 1992). From this perspective, many researchers have investigated the attitudes of beginning teachers toward inclusion and the aspects associated with the formation of these attitudes. These investigations suggest that the majority of beginning teachers support the concept of inclusion and believe in the benefits of inclusion for all students (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000b; Lambe & Bones, 2006; Martinez, 2003; Romi & Leyser, 2006; Yellin, Yellin, Claypool, Mokhtari, Carr, Latiker, Risley & Szabo, 2003). However, this course of research has also revealed that beginning teachers have significant concerns regarding whether all students will benefit from inclusive settings (Andrews & Clementson, 1997).

Students with intellectual disabilities, behavioural disorders, and multiple disabilities were seen as causing more anxiety and stress to beginning teachers than students with other special needs (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000b; Cook, 2002; Hastings &
Oakford, 2003) while students with mild disabilities (e.g. students with learning disabilities) were the most accepted group in the inclusive classrooms by beginning teachers (Cook, 2002). The research has also indicated that teachers have concerns about teacher education programs and their effectiveness to prepare teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms (Lombard, Miller & Hazelkorn, 1998; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Winter, 2006). These concerns and other aspects related to pre-service teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion are discussed in the section that follows.

2.5 Aspects Related to Beginning Teachers’ Attitudes toward Inclusion of Students with Special Needs

As the research has identified, teacher attitudes are one of the most influential variables in the success of inclusion (Hastings & Oakford, 2003). A teacher’s perceptions and attitude towards inclusion will influence and effect the environment of a classroom, often ultimately placing limitations on the successes of their students especially those with special needs. Studies identifying teacher attitudes towards students with special needs are finding that teachers agree in principle with the goals of inclusion, but many do not feel prepared to work in inclusive settings (Klavina, Block & Larins, 2007; Leatherman, 2007; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Avaradmis & Norwich, 2002). It is important to understand the aspects that influence the teachers’ beliefs and attitudes in order to be able to positively affect and change them. The available research suggests that beginning teachers’ attitudes toward students with special needs might be influenced by a number of significant interrelated aspects. These aspects include their contact and experience with people with special needs, the
nature and severity of the disability, the level of support available in schools and their preparation in teacher education programs. These aspects will be discussed in relation to the previous research about beginning teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion in the following four subsections.

1. Contact experience with people with disabilities

In addition to beginning teachers’ experience with inclusive education, their prior contact with people with special needs also seems related to teachers’ attitudes. Teachers who were acquainted with a person with special needs had more positive attitudes towards inclusion than teachers who had no prior contact with someone with special needs. Researchers have examined the effect of providing beginning teachers with different forms of contact with people with special needs in an educational context. In their investigation, Brownlee and Carrington (2000) sought to answer the following question: Can pre-service teachers’ attitudes towards disability change by providing them with sustained contact with a person who has a disability? The results of this research indicated that beginning teachers’ perceptions of people with special needs were positively affected by their interaction with an assistant teacher who had a physical disability. The students reported that the collaboration (a) was generally a positive experience for them, (b) provided them with first-hand knowledge of disabilities, and (c) helped them to develop more knowledge about people with special needs. Also, when asked to reflect on the current teacher education program and its effectiveness in preparing them, they stated that not enough information related to disabilities was included in the course. Furthermore, they believed that more practical
experiences with people with special needs would have helped them in their future career as teachers. Some research has also revealed that beginning teachers who are familiar with inclusive settings and were themselves members of inclusive classrooms may have more positive attitudes toward inclusion. A study by Sharma, Forlin, Loreman and Earle (2006) indicated that beginning teachers generally held positive attitudes toward inclusion and beginning teachers who reported having previous contact with people with special needs had more positive attitudes toward inclusion than their colleagues.

Most research has revealed that beginning teachers who reported prior association or were provided with contact with people with special needs showed more positive attitudes toward inclusion and people with special needs in general. This contact has proven effective whether it happens sometime before an intervention (Hastings, Hewes, Lock & Witting, 1996; Sharma et al., 2006) or is part of the intervention (Bishop & Jones, 2002; Brownlee & Carrington, 2000). It is important to note that mere contact with students with special needs may not necessarily be associated with the development of more favourable views, as the way the contact is structured seems to have an impact on the change of attitudes. Beginning teachers who participated in structured contacts with people with special needs in teacher education programs reported more favourable attitudes (Bishop & Jones, 2002; Brownlee & Carrington, 2000). These findings highlight the importance of practical components of teacher education courses and professional development opportunities and education.
2. Nature and severity of the disability

The severity of a student’s special needs appears to be directly related to the beginning teacher’s willingness to teach the student and their overall support for the concept of inclusion. Studies conducted with mainstream teachers indicate that teachers’ attitudes may be influenced by the level of needs they are asked to accommodate within their classrooms. It has been recognised that teachers’ willingness to cater for students with special needs, consistent with their general level of support for inclusion, appears to be related to the severity and type of the disability (Alghazo & Naggar Gaad, 2004). For example, students with intellectual disabilities or emotional and behavioural disorders are characteristically rated less positively by teachers (Lifshitz, Glaubman & Issawi, 2004). Teachers are more willing to accommodate students with mild disabilities or physical/sensory impairments than students with more complex needs. De Boar, Pijl and Minnaert (2009) found in their review of studies that there is enough evidence to suggest, in the case of the more severe learning needs and behavioural disorders, that teachers hold negative attitudes to the implementation of inclusion.

Previous studies have shown that in general, teachers are not as supportive of the inclusion of students with behavioural disorders, intellectual disabilities, and multiple disabilities (Cook, 2002). The highest level of support is for students with mild disabilities who require the least amount of accommodation in both curriculum and instruction (Glaubman & Lifshitz, 2001). Norwich (2002) examined the attitudes of general education teachers towards inclusion and established that any inconsistencies
in teacher attitudes towards different types of disabilities are attributed to a teacher’s perception of the additional instructional and classroom management skills required in order to support these students. The major aspects identified as influencing beginning teachers’ attitudes towards those with special needs were based on the child and their special needs. The specific types of special needs that are perceived by teachers to bring the most challenges to their daily routines are the exact special needs that teachers seem to hold the most negative views of and are the least willing to accommodate. Children with emotional disturbances and behavioural disorders were less likely to have beginning teachers who expressed positive feelings. Those working with older children had more positive feelings towards those with special needs.

Beginning teachers were also more accommodating toward including students with intellectual disabilities than children with emotional or behavioural difficulties (Hastings & Oakford, 2003). Likewise, teachers in the Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden (2000) study also showed that they were more prepared to accept having a student in the classroom who is mildly disabled than they were willing to have a student with severe special needs in the classroom. When questioned as to why they were less supportive of including students with more severe special needs, teachers responded that they did not have the time to prepare for these students. Of course, the type and severity of the student’s special needs are only two aspects of students’ overall characteristics.

In an investigation of seventy inclusive classroom teachers, Cook (2001) found that students with either severe or obvious special needs were over represented among
teachers’ nominations in the indifference category. Teachers reported a lack of knowledge for their indifference towards their students with special needs, whereas students without special needs were usually nominated in this category because of negative social-personal attributes that made it hard to know or notice them. Cook also speculated that this indifference towards students with significant special needs may actually be because teachers do not feel responsible for accommodating them. If this is accurate, then a lack of teacher responsibility rather than student characteristics may be the basis of indifference. Nonetheless, the known consequences of a teachers’ indifference towards a student and their educational prospects provides added emphasis to the importance of teacher responsibility and engagement for students with special needs.

In summary, although beginning teachers were found to have positive attitudes toward students with special needs, they were concerned about the nature and severity of the students’ needs. Students with emotional and behavioural disorders were seen as the most challenging group in relation to inclusion. These students were linked with more concern and stress compared to other students (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000b), while students with intellectual disabilities were more acceptable in relation to inclusion (Hastings & Oakford, 2003). Furthermore, beginning teachers believed that general education classrooms might not be the best settings for students with emotional and behavioural disorders, intellectual disabilities, or multiple disabilities (Cook, 2002). These conclusions suggest that beginning teachers may need
extensive preparation to meet the needs of students with more severe disabilities in inclusive settings.

3. Level of support available in schools

Inclusive school programs are different in the nature and amount of support provided to the beginning teacher from district to district, both in definition and implementation (Leatherman, 2007). While the benefits of these supports can be used to meet the academic requirements of students with special needs, only a very small percentage of beginning teachers are provided with the appropriate support or know how or where to seek support. As Ainscow (2004) stated, one of the reasons “for problems in implementing a policy of integration are that regular school teachers still do not regard the teaching of pupils with special needs as their responsibility and are often not equipped (with training and materials) to do so” (p. 8). For inclusion to be successful and continue in the future, it is vital to gain support from administrators and service providers in order to receive additional resources and support in the classroom.

There is also a need for the schools and administrators to take advantage of informational resources through professional development courses and in-services to change teachers’ attitudes (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Professional collaboration between beginning teachers and teachers with special needs education has been shown to play an integral role in the success of inclusion (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Hodge and Jansma (2000), reiterated in their research that inclusion requires that both the beginning teachers and teachers with special needs education work as a team to educate the students with special needs. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) found through
their research that professional development appeared to be an effective way to help students having difficulties with learning. Schools need to access a variety of professional development activities and resources to improve teachers’ skills, knowledge and understanding for effective intervention.

Beginning teachers placed in rural schools may face additional challenges when teaching students with special needs and may find implementing an inclusionary program quite difficult. Rural teachers may not have access to teacher education programs or professional development that can assist in teacher preparation (Salend, 2001). Additionally, rural school districts serve more students living at the low socioeconomic level than non-rural school districts (Salend, 2001). The low socioeconomic status of the population in rural schools can lead to other concerns affecting teachers and administrators in rural schools (i.e., increased crime, violence, drug abuse, student drop-out problems, and teacher retention).

4. Teacher education programs

For research to determine how successfully schools are catering for students with special needs, it is important to look at how teachers are being educated to cater for these students as well as the other influences supporting teacher development. It is also important for education courses to keep up with new research findings and improve the curriculum to match this new information. As positive attitudes toward inclusion among beginning teachers appears to be a necessary factor for inclusion to be successful, teacher education program administrators have become increasingly concerned with preparing general education beginning teachers to teach students with
special needs in inclusive settings (Hutchinson & Martin, 1999). The attitudes of teachers in an inclusive school are the most important aspect in creating an inclusive class. Since it is essential that beginning teachers have positive attitudes towards inclusion, preparation programs should emphasise and enhance teachers’ thoughts and perceptions toward inclusion (Lambe & Bones, 2006; Woodcock, Hemmings & Kay, 2012). The development of positive attitudes and the ability to teach children with special needs is a learned process and it is an on-going process.

These programs have implemented many changes to impact positively on the attitudes and the instructional skills of future teachers. The majority of these programs have examined the impact of inclusive education courses on the attitudes of general education beginning teachers towards inclusion of students with special needs in general education classrooms (Carroll, Forlin & Jobling, 2003; Shade & Stewart, 2001). In some programs, these courses were accompanied by field-based practical experiences in inclusive classroom settings (Campbell, Gilmore & Cuskelley, 2003; Jung, 2007). In general, results of studies investigating the impact of coursework and/or field experiences have found that beginning teachers have positive attitudes toward the general idea of inclusive education, especially in their early years in teacher education programs.

In an investigation of the impact of teacher education in special needs education on the attitudes of Australian beginning teachers towards people with special needs, Carroll, Forlin and Jobling (2003) surveyed 220 beginning teachers at two universities before and after their participation in a ten-week special needs education course. The
results indicated that beginning teachers, once they had completed the course, felt less ignorant and were more confident regarding how to act toward persons with special needs. They also demonstrated a greater emphasis on the person rather than the special needs. Furthermore, given the limited experience that beginning teachers had in this study, the authors concluded that participation in these courses can help beginning teachers’ to develop knowledge, understanding and improve attitudes toward individuals with special needs. Ultimately, relevant coursework, practical experience, collaboration, development of skills in behaviour management, and construction of effective learning experiences were seen as essential features when designing courses to influence beginning teachers’ attitudes toward children with special needs.

Another study by Andrews and Clementson (1997) sought to determine if active learning strategies and the use of literature regarding special needs in a compulsory introduction to special needs education course had an effect upon beginning teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion. The authors concluded that effective teaching methodology is essential in fostering positive attitudes toward students with special needs. Beginning teachers were open to change their previously held views about inclusion or people with special needs through many active learning strategies. The facilitation of contact with people with special needs was shown to have had a positive influence on their attitudes (Brownlee & Carrington, 2000; Hastings, Hewes, Lock & Witting, 1996). Furthermore, these attitudes were positively influenced by using structured workshop activities (Bishop & Jones, 2002), contact provided with people
with severe special needs (Brownlee & Carrington, 2000), raising students’ awareness of the different type of special needs (Campbell, Gilmore & Cuskelley, 2003), and adapting instructional techniques like simulation, role playing, problem solving, and open-ended discussions (Andrews & Clementson, 1997).

As this review of the literature has shown, in the area of inclusion of students with special needs, the beginning teachers’ attitudes are not well understood. The majority of general education beginning teachers who participated in the previously reviewed studies had few prior experiences working with students with special needs in inclusive settings. Therefore, it has been documented that many of these beginning teachers in their early teacher education had not yet developed clear perspectives about teaching in inclusive settings (Lambe & Bones, 2006). The findings were able to indicate that beginning teachers might be open to changing their previously held attitudes. It seems that the prior experiences with people with special needs and the structure of teacher education programs are the most important aspects that determine beginning teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion of students with special needs.

2.6 Teachers’ perceptions and their impact on students with special educational needs

Forlin (2008) points out how teachers also need a clear understanding of their role as a teacher. She adds: “Effective inclusive teaching also requires a high level of ethics and morals, an understanding that the teacher’s role is not only to inform and facilitate learning but also act as a role model for guiding the development of their students, and a commitment to enable instruction to happen” (p.65). Jobling and Moni (2004)
noted that many beginning teachers feel unprepared to meet the diverse needs of mainstream inclusive classrooms. The study by Hodkinson (2006), found that teachers in their first year of teaching were less positive about inclusion than they were as beginning teachers. In part, this decrease was attributed to their perception that they lacked the specialised skills needed to cater for children with special educational needs. Accordingly, beginning teachers need both ‘the will and the skill’ (Jackson, Chalmers, & Wills, 2004) to effectively cater for the diversity of inclusive classrooms. For these reasons, Haug (2003) stated that “teacher education must give all teacher students a competence that makes them able to meet and teach the range of variation in or the heterogeneity of the pupil population” (p.101). It is vitally important to prepare educators to teach diverse student populations effectively to enable them to have positive first experiences in their new role especially when their teaching career may span thirty years or more. According to Jobling and Moni (2004), this also means that teacher education courses need to “take some responsibility for preventing the development of negative attitudes towards students with special needs as well as challenging non-inclusive practices” (p.5).

Bandura (1993) suggested that even when individuals perceive that specific actions will likely bring about the desired behaviour, they will not engage in these actions or persist after initiating the behaviour, if they feel that they do not possess the required skills. Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) conducted a meta-analysis of 28 studies and found that in general, teachers endorse the concept of providing support to students with special needs. In spite of this evidence, only one third of the teachers felt that
they had the time, resources, education, preparation and skills needed to successfully accommodate students with special needs. Teachers would like their classes to be inclusive but the realities of putting it all into practice on a daily basis cause concern and anxiety (Van Reusen, Shoho & Barker, 2001). In order for beginning teachers to feel positive about inclusion and students with special needs, they need to feel confident in their ability to successfully include students with special needs in their classrooms.

The shaping of positive attitudes toward students with special needs is an important aspect of the education of beginning teachers. Teacher education in the knowledge of special needs and appropriate strategies for teaching students with special needs has a positive impact on academic success. Teachers who feel negatively toward students with special needs or have not been educated in the appropriate strategies to teach inclusively are less likely to be successful. Teachers can also influence the facilitation of inclusion programs based on their own attitudes and willingness to include students with special needs in their classrooms. While it is vital to examine the attitudes of teachers through research, it is also important to be aware of the reality that attitudes are also being formed in the teacher education experiences of beginning teachers. Teachers' own understandings and beliefs, in part, may have their foundations in the experiences they had as students. This may be the result of their teacher education experiences (Pajares, 1992), or it may be a combination of their education and the influence of attitudes and beliefs of colleagues within the context of the school (Acker, 1990; D'Andrade, 1981). Consequently, if beginning teachers are effectively educated
in strategies, accommodations and interventions for working with students with special needs as well as being exposed to different types of special needs, they may display more positive attitudes toward inclusion (Cook, 2002; Avramidis et al., 2000; Barr & Bracchitta, 2008; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

An examination of studies looking at the attitudes of beginning teachers also revealed that a lack of knowledge and understanding about disabilities affected the ability of these teachers to accept students with special needs and differences (Cook, 2002). The lack of understanding of these disabilities increased anxiety and fear of individuals with special needs (D'Alonzo, Giordano & VanLeeuwen, 1997). The literature has revealed that one of the most important aspects affecting the successful integrating of students with special needs in the regular classroom is the attitudes of beginning teachers. The teacher’s attitude toward students with special needs should be frequently considered to ensure that students are given every available opportunity for success. A careful examination of the attitudes of teachers represents a foundation for coming to terms with teaching students with special needs and provides a basis for the move toward truly inclusive education. It is the expectation that an inclusive education course will benefit beginning teachers in gaining an understanding of students with special needs, and therefore increase their comfort level with diverse learners and the concept of inclusion.

Several studies have reported that the areas of importance regarding inclusion consist of classroom management strategies, adaptation of curriculum and materials, and the roles and responsibilities associated with collaboration between beginning teachers
and teachers with special needs education (Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick & Scheer, 1999; Kamens, Loprete & Slostad, 2000; Taylor, Richards, Goldstein & Schilit, 1997; Westwood & Graham, 2003). As some students with special needs may display significant behaviour problems and present more challenging learning requirements than students already in mainstream schools, they may require additional attention and support for a successful educational experience (Shade & Stewart, 2001; Salend, 2001). If beginning teachers are appropriately educated in strategies, teaching and learning accommodations and interventions for working with students with special needs as well as being exposed to different types of disabilities, they may display more positive attitudes toward inclusion (Cook, 2002; Forlin, 2001). This would ensure that beginning teachers would be more confident in their skills, and students with special needs would have a greater chance for success in mainstream inclusive classroom.

2.7 Preparation of Beginning Teachers

Teacher education courses attempt to provide their students with the skills, knowledge and understandings required for success in their position and professional community through university based units and a series of professional practical experiences although this is only part of the process. The report *Preparing a Profession* produced the Australian Council of Deans in Education (1998) stated that “initial teacher education, as its name implies, is merely the first stage of the teacher education process; it prepares teachers to begin teaching but cannot possibly provide them with all the knowledge, skills and understandings they will need throughout their careers” (p.7).
There are now professional associations that provide the framework for the provision of what are considered by various authorities to be the essential skills, knowledge and understandings for entry to the profession and progression within it. National standards and guidelines for initial teacher education in Australia have been developed (Adey, 1998). These professional standards represent an indicator for decisions about the preparedness of beginning teachers. These guidelines state that “graduates should regard all students as capable of learning and be committed to treating all students equitably” (p.10). The guidelines also state that graduates should have “an understanding of the general nature of diversity and the conceptual and ethical issues involved” (p.11). A number of principles for implementation were proposed including the stipulation that “any procedure must promote and support quality, diversity, innovation, and the networking of best practice in initial teacher education” (p.47).

The challenge for teacher preparation courses is to provide education that will enable beginning teachers to meet these guidelines and standards with confidence and a positive attitude.

The report of the 2005 inquiry into the appropriateness of beginning teacher education in Victoria (Parliament of Victoria, Education Training Committee) made the remark that “It is improbable that any single pre-service teacher education course is able to cover all the skills and knowledge contemporary teachers require, let alone provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to master them all... [G]iven this, pre-service teacher education must evaluate the skills and knowledge essential for beginning teachers” (2005, p.217). The report explicitly called for studies into the
efficacy of teacher education, both in the pre-service phase and in the early years of teaching. The report also noted (2005) that “… there is simply not a sufficiently rich body of research evidence to enable it to come to any firm conclusions about the overall quality of teacher education in Australia” (p.5). Research into the effectiveness of teacher education courses by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) (2002) through their national study of the transition of beginning teachers into their profession provided some useful insights into perceptions of both the beginning teachers and their colleagues. Through this study, beginning teachers and their supervisors were asked for a general assessment of how effectively teacher education courses prepared beginning teachers for their first year of teaching. The findings of this study indicated that a significant number of beginning teachers and their supervisors felt they were not sufficiently prepared for inclusive teaching. These results show general feelings about preparedness however they do not provide a clear understanding of what led to these feelings and the aspects behind the results.

The key issue often debated in the research relating to teacher preparation courses is the practical professional experience provided to beginning teachers and whether this is adequate to prepare student teachers for the profession. Wideen, Mayer-Smith and Moon (1998) in their review of literature on teacher preparation, suggested that the research indicated the need to really question the idea that professional practice provides the intended “bridge between the theory, knowledge, and skills gained at university and their application in the classroom” (p.152). Wideen, Mayer-Smith and Moon’s (1998) review identified the main issue emerging from their research was the
need to connect school and university cultures. This struggle continued into the first year of teaching, with six case studies of teachers in their first year of experience pointing to ‘an incongruity’ between university experiences and the reality of teaching in their own classroom. The provision of support for beginning teachers to assist them to successfully negotiate this transition and establish themselves as recognised members of a professional community then becomes imperative. Listening to the stories of the trainees and trying to read between the lines remains as a continuing challenge to teacher educators (Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1998, p.69). Beginning teachers need to be prepared to teach children with special needs before entering the classroom and it is essential for these teachers to have the best education possible.

One prerequisite of the successful inclusion of students with special needs is a positive attitude toward inclusion among beginning teachers (Cook, 2002). Teacher preparation programs need to help teachers to develop positive attitudes so that children feel more successful and positive in their classrooms. Beginning teachers who identify themselves as less well prepared and less capable of teaching students with significant special needs may be more likely to hand over responsibility for the student with special needs to others. The preparation of beginning teachers to successfully educate students with special needs is therefore a concern for university teacher education programs (Kamens, Loprete & Slostad, 2000; Bullough, 1997; Hutchinson & Martin, 1999). Teacher attitudes toward inclusion and students with special needs should be frequently assessed to ensure that students have maximum opportunities for success. Teacher education in awareness of diversity and appropriate strategies for teaching
students with special needs should take place prior to the placement of students in general education classrooms so that teachers feel comfortable teaching students with learning differences (Bishop & Jones, 2002; Campbell, Gilmore & Cuskelley, 2003). It is optimal then, that teacher education occurs at the pre-service level. “If we have an intention to address all learner needs then only one thing is certain and that is that we must address the demands for change in teacher education” (Rose & Grosvenor, 2001, p.56). If beginning teachers feel negatively toward students with special needs or have not been educated in appropriate strategies for the successful inclusion of students with special needs, they are less likely to be willing to work with these students in their classrooms (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart & Eloff, 2003; Aksamit, 1990; Woodcock, 2013). Students with special needs are less likely to be successful in mainstream classrooms unless the appropriate teacher education has occurred. As Woodcock (2013) stated, “if these future teachers have the attitude, and belief, that students do not have the ability to succeed, then their behaviour towards the student will be reflected in ways that will, more than likely, bring about future failure” (p.25). Additional support in the classroom such as an educational assistant or access to appropriate resources will also help the student's level of success. As students with special needs have become increasingly included into the general education classroom, there is a crucial need to educate beginning teachers about appropriate methods and strategies for teaching students with various special needs (Cook, 2002; Romi & Leyser, 2006).
Teachers may feel challenged by the task but it is important to continue to develop the skills, knowledge and understandings required to teach children with special needs and maintain a positive attitude to keep these children feeling successful. Preparing both beginning teachers and practicing teachers for the responsibility of supporting children with special needs has become very challenging and commitment is needed. Teachers’ attitudes become a crucial component in building a successful inclusive classroom. The literature has shown the most significant factor to consider in implementing an effective teacher preparation course is to have structured support in the development of effective teaching strategies. Beginning teachers should be explicitly taught how to educate children with special needs and cater for their diverse abilities. Rose and Grosvenor (2001) stated that “The aim is to strengthen each trainee teacher's pedagogical skills alongside cultivating general readiness for teachers to respond to the challenges posed by a swiftly changing range of societal demands” (p.57). The easiest and most direct method for achieving this objective is to enhance the teacher preparation programs, so that beginning teachers are taught about the different areas of special needs, the children’s learning difficulties, how to identify their needs, how to teach the children despite their difficulties and how to remediate their learning problems while teaching them academics through their preferred learning style.

Universities can provide the theoretical background that teachers will need to apply, however once the teacher is in the practical setting of the classroom, there need to be support mechanisms in place so that beginning teachers can receive adequate professional support. Booth, Nes and Stromstad (2003), stated that “there are
considerable limitations in the competence of new teachers for meeting the heterogeneity of the learner population and developing a school for all” (p.12). Beginning teachers need a sustained and quality approach to their education that is specifically suited to the practical environment they operate within. There is evidence from the research that education at a pre-service level can be beneficial. Teachers with comprehensive and specialised education are more likely to have positive beliefs concerning inclusive practices and feel better prepared to provide services for children with diverse needs in inclusive settings (Stolber, Gettinger & Goetz, 1998). In addition, teachers’ beliefs in their ability to include students with special needs in their class have increased as a result of education (Bennett, Deluca & Bruns, 1997). Education for inclusion within teacher preparation programs will prepare teachers to better understand the goals, objectives, and implementation strategies for the various support services available to better cater for children with special needs (Nougaret, Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2005; O’Shea, Stoddard & O’Shea, 2000). Some aspects of teaching can only be learned through practical experience and not all situations can be anticipated. Pre-service teacher education programs, however, can be improved to allow for more practical experiences and awareness of the issues associated with educating students with special needs in an inclusive setting. Increased knowledge about inclusion of students with special needs brings about higher levels of confidence, and helps to minimise the fear and anxiousness often associated with the lack of awareness and exposure to children with special needs (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000a).
Even though their general beliefs and attitudes toward inclusion may be positive, beginning teachers have repeatedly reported that they feel unprepared to effectively implement inclusion (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Intriguingly, these claims of insufficient skills and education have not changed over the past two decades (Pudlas, 2003; Woodcock, 2013; Loreman, Sharma & Forlin, 2013), despite changes to pre-service preparation of teachers and the availability of various professional development opportunities. Information about the specific education received by research participants has usually not been collected, so it is difficult to determine whether these teachers did not receive appropriate education or if the education received was inadequate. It is also possible that the lack of preparedness could be used as an excuse to mask teachers’ reluctance to include students with special needs in their classrooms. Teachers may state that they are generally supportive of inclusion but claim they are not adequately prepared in order to deflect attention towards the institutions responsible for pre-service education and professional development. Alternatively, the education currently available may not be sufficient to meet the needs of beginning teachers. For this reason, research involving teachers who have included students with special needs in their classes has put less emphasis on the issue of education. For example, although the interview protocol in the Olson, Chalmers and Hoover (1997) study included a place to record the highest degree obtained by the participants and their education in special education, the article presenting their study did not mention these aspects. Similarly, there has been little discussion of the education or education of participants in studies investigating the experiences of teachers who have included students with special needs in their class (Coots, Bishop &
Grenot-Scheyer, 1998; Janney & Snell, 1997; Snyder, Garriott & Aylor, 2001; York, Giangreco, Vandercook & Macdonald, 1992). Despite this view, several researchers have suggested that teacher education may indeed be beneficial and some experienced teachers have recommended the delivery of professional development opportunities (Janney, Snell, Beers & Raynes, 1995), as the acquisition of knowledge about students with special needs builds confidence, and contributes to higher levels of teacher efficacy and more positive attitudes toward the inclusion of children with special needs. Consequently, it is necessary to address the inconsistency in ability levels reflected by beginning teachers through adequate education in order to better cater to the diversity of needs in the regular education classroom, particularly at the commencement level.

2.8 Conclusions

The literature has shown that beginning teachers are less confident when they feel inadequately equipped and overwhelmed by the prospect of teaching children who have special needs. Teaching programs need to prepare teachers effectively to work with all children and cater for the diversity of an inclusive classroom (Woodcock, 2013). As it is the teachers’ approach which sets the tone of classroom, the success of inclusion programs may well be determined by the teachers’ attitude as they interact with students with special needs. Generally, the researchers are in agreement that complete acceptance and inclusion of students with special needs will happen only after there is a long-term change in attitude (Beattie, Anderson & Antonak, 1997). The research also suggests that most teachers are not sufficiently prepared to respond to
the inclusion of students with special needs in their classrooms, and not only are teachers unprepared, but they will often develop an opinion of students with special needs that contributes to their difficulties (Woodcock, 2013). In order to cater effectively for students with special needs, preparation programs for effective teachers need to be extensive and give multiple opportunities for beginning teachers to put learned theories into practice and use this practice to make the theory meaningful.

This view is reinforced by the recommendations of the Meyer Report (Department of Education Victoria, 2001) which recognises the need for additional support, education and expertise for beginning teachers.

Additionally, beginning teachers need to be provided with information on the legislation surrounding inclusion and practical strategies to cope in the inclusive classroom during professional development and teacher preparation programs, in order to prepare them with the necessary knowledge they need to successfully take on their role as inclusive educators. It is vital to support the development of positive attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom and educate teachers to be able to effectively cater for these students (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Supporting teachers’ abilities and commitment to meet the needs of their students will encourage them to make changes to their attitudes towards inclusion and provide them with the confidence to develop strategies to cater for all students.

Previous research has shown that pre-service teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness to teach students with special educational needs impacted on their
attitudes towards these students in mainstream classrooms. This study explores the needs of beginning teachers and their perceptions of the ways in which their pre-service education has or has not prepared them to teach students with special educational needs. Exploring teachers’ perspectives in educational research is useful because teachers can provide personal knowledge about their experiences and attitudes. According to Zimbardo and Lieppe (1991), attitudes are an important area to study because they influence so much of our personal lives. He describes how attitudes include desires, convictions, feelings, views, opinions, beliefs, hopes, judgements and sentiments. Therefore, the study of attitudes is very important because there is a general understanding that human behaviour and actions are influenced by attitudes, whereby attitudes are seen as the cause and behaviour is the consequence (Mushoriwa, 2001). Through the understanding of teachers' attitudes, it is possible to understand the importance of these attitudes and how they should be defined and framed so that teachers can be informed.

The current research was conducted to further explore pre-service teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness to teach students with special educational needs in mainstream schools and provide insight into the reasons behind the survey results shown in previous studies. It also explored their attitudes toward the inclusion of students with special educational needs in general education classrooms and the factors associated with these attitudes (e.g. nature of the disability, contact with people with disabilities, and beneficial components of their teacher education program.)
Thus the specific aims of this study were to understand and explore three main aspects: First to explore the relationship between teacher’s perceptions of their perceived preparation and their attitudes toward inclusion, as well as their confidence to teach in inclusive settings. Secondly, it sought to gain an understanding of the most significant aspects of teacher preparation and how these have influenced the attitudes beginning teachers have towards the teaching of students with special educational needs and how such preparation programs can better prepare future teachers for inclusive education. Finally, to identify barriers that may interfere with teacher preparedness for inclusive education. The general aim of this research was to examine the perceptions of beginning teachers regarding the effectiveness of preparation for teaching students with special educational needs. This study has wider theoretical implications for the reconceptualization of pre-service inclusive education preparation in Western Australia. The findings have the potential to influence changes at a tertiary level that are congruent with beginning teachers’ perceived needs. The research questions investigated were developed directly from the literature review and the aims of the research.
Chapter 3 Methodology

(I)t must have regard for theory, since otherwise research risks producing a jumble of unrelated fact. (Hegarty, 1998, p.5)

The main purpose of Chapter Three is to describe and justify the research methodology used in the study. The chapter outlines how the process of designing the study was influenced by theoretical literature, relevant bodies of research, practical experiences and discussion about research methods. The chapter positions the study and identifies the aims of the research and the methods being considered. This chapter also identifies the data analysis methods for the research and acknowledges the subjective role of the researcher within the inquiry. It is also acknowledged in this process that the role of the researcher in the inquiry process is subjective and all biases need to be clearly described to maintain the validity of the research. From this perspective, the product of this research will adequately reflect the perceptions of the research participants and will be reasonable to them, to the other people who work in similar circumstances and to the wider research community.

3.1 Introduction

Schwandt (2006) stated that the “methods employed to generate, analyse, and organise data and to link evidence to hypotheses are not under the control of an autonomous, disengaged, disembodied subject, knower, or ideal epistemic agent” (p.199). The researcher was guided by the interpretive paradigm when designing the study and these are the influences and considerations that have shaped the focus of
the investigation. As it is the researcher’s aim to utilise research methods that align with the framework to conduct the investigation, the researcher intended to develop these methods continually to meet the needs of the investigation as it unfolds.

As Patton (2002) described, “qualitative designs continue to be emergent even after data collection begins” (p.255).

Qualitative research does not begin with hypotheses but rather research questions to guide the study. As Merriam (2002) stated:

Research questions are similar to hypotheses in quantitative research; hypotheses are much more precise and indicate the nature of measurement and analysis involved . . . [research] questions reflect the researcher’s thinking on the most significant aspects of the study. They guide the inquiry, and they determine how data are to be collected. (p.60)

3.2 Research Question

The research was concerned with the perceptions and attitudes of beginning teachers and the research question developed to guide the study was: “What are the perceptions of preparedness of beginning teachers and how are these related to their attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs?” This led to the following specific questions:

What are the perceptions of pre-service and beginning teachers regarding their confidence and preparedness to successfully educate students with special educational needs?
How do these perceptions of preparedness influence their attitude towards the inclusion of students with special needs?

Research Questions:

What are the perceptions of pre-service and beginning teachers regarding their confidence and preparedness to successfully educate students with special educational needs?

How do these perceptions of preparedness influence their attitude towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs?

Questions that guided data collection:

1. How confident do pre-service and beginning teachers feel about teaching students with special needs (students who have intellectual or physical disabilities)?
2. How prepared do these teachers feel about teaching students with special needs?
3. What concern (if any) do these teachers have about teaching students with special needs?
4. What do pre-service and beginning teachers identify as the most beneficial learning experiences in preparing them for educating students with special needs?
5. What aspects of their pre-service education do these teachers feel could be improved or changed to support them more effectively?
6. What other support do these teachers identify as needed in order for them to be more confident about teaching students with special needs?

Figure 1. The Research Theme and Questions

3.3 Identification of the methodology

This research was conducted using qualitative inquiry methods (Patton, 2002) as the research involved interpreting the experiences and views of new graduate teachers in order to explore their perceptions of educating students with special educational needs. As the research allows open ended discussion of the perceptions of beginning teachers, a qualitative approach of inquiry was used as the primary research method.
Qualitative methods capture the human perspective and provide depth of information and the more personal perspective required in this investigation (Cresswell, 2003). As the research investigated individual perceptions, I considered this to be effective way to fully capture this understanding. Through the research, I investigated the experiences and attitudes of teachers using a holistic focus as information when viewed separate from its context only offers a partial picture of the perceptions of those involved. It was believed that the research conducted previously had surveyed the perceptions of teachers regarding their preparedness when investigating the inclusion of children with special educational needs but further insight into the reasons behind the survey results was warranted. I focused on this aspect of teaching in order to fully understand the impact of inclusion from the teachers’ perspectives and experiences.

It is acknowledged that the different participants in this study bring with them varying experiences, practices and personal traits. This does not detract from the value of their perceptions; rather, as they are a major component in the teacher preparation process, their views regarding the effectiveness of their teacher preparation provides essential data for the development of pre-service teacher education preparation programs. Although this study focuses on the views of teachers from one university, the results could have wider applications, generating further questions and areas that need to be investigated in depth within the field of pre-service teacher education.

The qualitative inquiry method of semi-structured phone interviews and follow up focus group interviews were the primary means used to collect data and provide the
personal viewpoints of the participants in order to give meaning and perspective to the results. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) state:

This kind of interview seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees’ lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena. It comes close to an everyday conversation, but as a professional interview it has a purpose and involves a specific approach and technique; it is semi-structured – it is neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire. (p.27)

Qualitative approaches are designed to obtain information from the participants in their natural settings. The use of phone interviews provided rich and meaningful data, supported by transcript reviews and follow-up focus group interviews to clarify aspects of the data and add more depth to the responses. The follow-up focus group interviews were conducted to ensure depth of understanding of the individual data. This enabled the research to provide the in-depth personal perspectives required and ensure the data analysis reflects the viewpoints of the participants appropriately.

3.4 Ethical Guidelines

In this study, ethics approval was granted by the university and the researcher adhered to four ethical guidelines mentioned by Bogdan and Biklen (1998). First, the identities of the participants were protected verbally and in writing. Second, each participant was informed of the research study and provided written consent to participate in the study. Third, the participants were given the opportunity to read and edit the
transcripts from the recordings of the interviews after the study was complete. Finally, the themes and findings identified from the data were member-checked in the focus groups in order to maintain the validity of the study.

3.5 Researcher Bias

This study revolved around beginning teachers’ perceptions of preparedness for teaching students with special educational needs in a general education setting. I was interested in the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes that beginning teachers have about their preparation for teaching students with special educational needs. While investigating the thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs of beginning teachers, it was important to take into account my own teaching experiences and personal beliefs in this groundwork because those aspects affect my perspective. In qualitative research, the researcher is “the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (Merriam, 1998, p.7). When filtering the data through the researcher’s eyes and ears, “interpretations of reality are accessed directly through their observations and interviews” (Merriam, 1998, p.203). In order to represent the participants' experience, it is necessary to elaborate on my teaching experiences and personal beliefs.

Many years of teaching to diverse learners has led me to believe that students learn by “a process whereby new meanings are created by the learner within the context of her or his current knowledge” (Poplin, 1988, p.404). Students learn through direct experiences that give them the opportunity to question previously held thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. By providing students with the opportunity to reflect on their perceptions, students gain insight into their personal and professional philosophies.
and feelings about teaching students with special educational needs. Even though they may retain negative attitudes toward teaching students with special educational needs, it is likely that beginning teachers will benefit from reflecting about their perceptions and their approach to teaching.

Prior to their university course, beginning teachers already hold well-developed thoughts, feelings, and concerns about teaching students with special educational needs based on their previous experiences. These experiences include non-constructive dialogue with peers, negative attitudes communicated through classes or the lack of exposure to the issues of teaching students with special educational needs. Throughout their teaching experience, they continuously create and recreate new thoughts, feelings, and concerns about teaching students with special educational needs (Poplin, 1988). By studying these creations, I hoped to understand how beginning teachers “make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 1998, p.6). It was essential to explore the perceptions beginning teachers have developed as a result of their real life experiences because it adds to the research that has already been completed in this area.

Most of the research in this area has been conducted through the use of surveys and researchers are now encouraging “the use of qualitative research designs” to enrich attitudinal research (Hodge & Jansma, 1999, p.60). From this perspective, I believe that the exploration of the thoughts, feelings, and concerns of beginning teachers provides a rich understanding of their perceptions and experiences as they teach students with special educational needs. Creswell (2003) explains that the researcher could
“understand a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (p.1-2). The experiences that the beginning teachers reflect on will paint a realistic picture of their individual viewpoints. Subsequently, I communicated these reflections and reported them in this study.

The personal experiences and beliefs I hold about the education of students with special educational needs was the catalyst for this study. During my undergraduate studies, only one course that focused on students with special educational needs was required. After completing this course, the mention of children with special educational needs seemed to disappear from focus. During my student teaching experience, there was no access to placements with students with special educational needs, which many would find inconceivable. However, since the move towards inclusion, students with special educational needs are being placed in general education classes with teachers feeling insufficiently prepared to teach them.

Inclusion has progressed into the school systems and despite this trend toward inclusion, the number of courses that focus on students with special educational needs in teacher preparation programs has not increased in response. Pre-service teachers are being faced with the teaching of students with special educational needs without sufficient additional education, which illustrates the motivation behind my interest in this field of research. Although pre-service teachers are required to complete a course that focuses on children with special educational needs, it often does not sufficiently prepare them to face the challenges of working with students with special educational
needs. Throughout many years of teaching, I have observed several student and beginning teachers develop negative attitudes towards students with special educational needs while they struggled to teach these students. From these experiences, I became interested in the pre-service teacher’s thoughts, feelings, and concerns when teaching students with special educational needs before, during, and after their graduation and through the research, aimed to contribute to the development of more effective teacher preparation courses.

3.6 Selection of participants

This investigation involved eight pre-service and twelve beginning teachers who had recently completed a Bachelor of Education degree at one university prior to the commencement of the study. The participants in this investigation represented a small number of the total cohort of teachers who completed the Bachelor of Education in that year. The participants were originally selected by purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p.61). In addition to purposeful sampling, the selection of participants was a convenience sample too, due to specific limitations of research costs, and time constraints regarding contact with participants and travel to the location of the focus group.
3.7 Sources of Data

This interpretive study sought to understand human behaviour through the perspective of the respondents and employed qualitative methods of data collection (Best & Kahn, 2003).

The data collection methods and data sources included:

1. Open-ended phone interviews at the end of the year and after the final university examinations.

2. Focus group of twelve to ensure interpretations and identified themes of analysed data accurate, and allow for further discussion.

*Individual phone interviews*

The initial data source for the study was the telephone interview using an interview guide. A semi-structured interview method was employed (Kvale, 1996) and the participants were interviewed individually. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for more flexibility in the inquiry process. The pre-service teachers were asked open-ended questions as this allowed for an unlimited number of possible answers and inclusion of the unexpected (Neuman, 2000). Through this format I was able to guide the interview by “a list of questions or issues to be explored” (Merriam, 1998, p.74). The goal was to allow participants to explore their thoughts and feelings and not be bound to answer closed questions. I wanted to be able to ask questions that lead to new issues on the topic that added a richer collection of information during the
interviewing process. This type of interview format gave me the opportunity to react and “respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview” of the participants and “to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p.74).

The interview guide was developed through a review of the literature relating to teacher preparation for inclusive education. Questions related to the effectiveness of their university degree in preparing the pre-service teachers for their first year of teaching students with special educational needs were discussed. It is recognised however, that these individuals may have had strong reasons, either for or against, the inclusion of students with special educational needs and their preparation course delivery. Four questions asked about teacher preparedness, the aspects affecting teacher confidence, concerns about teaching students with special educational needs, and how well the pre-service program prepared them for their first year of teaching students with special educational needs. The questions asked in the interviews are outlined below.

What are the perceptions of newly qualified teachers regarding their confidence and preparedness to successfully educate students with special educational needs?

How do these perceptions of preparedness influence their attitude towards the inclusion of students with special needs?
More specifically:

a) How confident do pre-service and beginning teachers (B. Ed. and Dip. Ed new graduates) feel about teaching students with special educational needs (students who have intellectual or physical disabilities)?

b) How well prepared do pre-service and beginning teachers feel about teaching students with special educational needs?

c) What concerns (if any) do these teachers have about teaching students with special educational needs?

d) What do pre-service and beginning teachers identify as the most beneficial learning experiences in preparing them for educating students with special educational needs?

e) What aspects of their pre-service education do these teachers feel could be improved or changed to support them more effectively?

f) What other support do these teachers identify as needed in order for them to be more confident about teaching students with special educational needs?

Focus group discussion

A focus group is described as “a small gathering of individuals who have a common interest or characteristic, assembled by a moderator, who uses the group and its interactions as a way to gain information about a particular issue” (Williams & Katz 2001, p.1). They are planned sessions where individuals discuss ideas and perceptions
focused around a topic of interest (Krueger, 1993). Focus group methodology was selected as a means to identify structures, processes, and activities, which promote and support the inclusive education of students with special educational needs.

The focus groups were conducted to review the themes and patterns identified from the initial eight interviews and elicit from each group of participants a comprehensive range of views, perceptions and reflections about their experiences of inclusive education to enable greater clarity of the findings of the study.

The focus group discussion process allowed the participants of this study to share their perceptions while being able to listen and respond to the views of other members of the group during discussions led by a facilitator (Krueger, 1993). Krueger notes that “the focus group helps people hear themselves and receive feedback from their peers” (Krueger, 1994, p.239). A number of researchers recommended focus group discussion method while collecting data in the area of disability research. For this reason, this method was utilised and I was able to gather data about the themes and patterns identified regarding beginning teacher preparedness and identify the aspects that influence the practice of inclusive education. Through focus group discussions, the participants were able to share their experiences with each other and receive feedback which could not have been captured through the conventional one-on-one interviews. In addition, focus group discussions provided a platform for participants to express their views about inclusive education. Focus group discussions enabled the researcher to gain greater insights into why certain opinions were held by teachers.
3.8 Procedure

The pre-service teachers were identified and approached to participate in the study through a university with contact being established after their final examinations, through an introductory letter (Appendix B). The letter clearly stated that informed consent is provided through the teacher completing and mailing the survey back to the researcher. The letter also indicated that teacher participation is voluntary, that respondent anonymity would be maintained at all times, that all information would be kept confidential, and that the participant could view the results of the study. The participants were provided with two ways in which to contact the researcher or the principal investigator of the study if they had concerns or questions. Participants were provided with a pre-stamped, self-addressed envelope in which they mailed the survey back to the researcher. The pre-service beginning teachers were requested to join the study and they consented and participated.

Each pre-service teacher was contacted after they returned their introductory letters at the end of the year to gather initial data on their response on the effectiveness of their teacher education preparation for their first year of teaching students with special educational needs. Phone interviews were conducted towards the beginning of the year, which allowed for informal discussions to elicit frank and honest responses. Interviews ranged in duration from 45 to 60 minutes. I facilitated the interview process, and tape recorded the information with participants’ consent. Before the interviews I informed the participants of the purpose the research and reminded the teachers that I was interested in finding out anything and everything with respect to
their experiences relating to their level of preparedness for inclusive education. The intention was to gain a more holistic picture of their perspectives while establishing a reciprocal relationship of understanding and rapport over time. The intention was also for the investigation to respond to the interactions between the participants and the researcher and continually meet the changing needs of this relationship. I made sure that the participants were comfortable and free from any distraction (Kruger, 1998). Throughout this process I remained as neutral as possible and sought clarification whenever it was deemed necessary. I also made sure that everyone participated and did not steer the discussion in my direction.

After the interview transcripts were completed, I returned the transcripts to the initial participants to allow for errors and changes to be made. Transcripts were then sent to participants to be checked for clarification of opinions and allow for feedback. This ensured the responses received were correct and reflected the perceptions and feelings of the participants. Data from the reviewed transcripts were then analysed to identify themes and patterns.

While the number of letters sent to beginning teachers was 218, only 8 teachers responded which was a significantly lower response rate than expected. Due to this low response, it was decided that focus groups would be used to discuss the themes and patterns identified from the data and gather more depth of information and verify the views and responses gained through the phone interviews.

Participants for the focus groups were ten beginning teachers identified through contact with local primary and secondary schools. Focus groups were conducted to
review the themes and patterns identified in the data and ensure they reflected the thoughts, beliefs and perceptions of a wider audience (Appendix C). Each of the focus group participants reviewed a summary of the data analysis procedure and a summary of the final themes identified from the data. They answered several standardized interview questions and offered comments on whether or not they felt the data were interpreted in a manner congruent with their own experiences.

3.9 Data Analysis

Since qualitative research generates a large mass of data, the material needed to be continually organised. For this interpretive investigation, data was analysed using an inductive analysis to identify “patterns, themes and categories in one’s data” (Patton 2003, p.453). The categories, concerns and issues expressed by the participants formed the basis for the construction of themes. The process of analysing data was an ongoing process (Merriam, 1998). As this was a qualitative study, the appropriate way to analyse data was to do it “simultaneously with the data collection” (Merriam, 1998, p.162). Not knowing what would be uncovered, the researcher understood that the final product would be shaped by the data that were collected and analysed (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, after each interview the data was transcribed and analysed to prepare for the following interview. After reading through the transcripts, important topics were recognised that needed to be addressed in the next interview. Furthermore, this provided an opportunity to add or drop certain questions that were not helpful for the study. Once these topics emerged, they were reviewed with the participants through the transcripts and semi-structured focus group interviews with
participants were then conducted to ensure accurate data analysis and assess the validity of these interpretations. To link themes with outcomes and impacts, a process/outcomes matrix was utilised to organise the data.

The audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim into written text. The researcher aimed at studying the data and letting themes emerge in order to reveal how confident the teachers felt about teaching students with special educational needs. Analysis procedures then followed a step by step constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) to develop themes. The collection of data from these interactions was then analysed to identify the themes and issues that emerge to construct a holistic understanding of the perspectives of these teachers. To begin with, an outline of paraphrased items was generated based on each interview text. This transformed the raw data into manageable thought units for analysis. Then each transcript was examined separately and whenever a new theme emerged, it was highlighted with the primary intent of developing themes from the data (Creswell, 2003). The identified themes within the transcript were then compared across all transcripts. Overall themes were then developed to conclude the process. This procedure was followed for each transcript analysed. A summary of all transcripts was compiled in which sub-themes were compared to come up with overall themes. The core themes and patterns developed by this thorough examination of the transcripts to explore the perceptions of participants in this study were later used to report the finding of this study.
After preliminary findings, a ‘member check’ exercise was carried out by allowing the participants to go through transcribed transcripts and preliminary themes. In addition to this they were also asked to add any additional information or qualifications to their summaries. All participants agreed with the summaries and confirmed that the information accurately reflected their contributions to this investigation. The data were grouped and developed into categories and themes (Struwig, Struwig & Stead, 2001). For example, categories such as the concerns beginning teachers have about the teaching of students with special educational needs were identified. To enhance credibility, the themes and issues that emerge from the data were raised and discussed with the participants in the focus groups. This consultation with participants was an ongoing part of the research process. From the data collected, the research aimed to ascertain the aspects of the beginning teachers’ preparation that are seen as most beneficial in supporting their teaching of students with special educational needs in inclusive settings and how their preparation may influence their attitudes towards these students.

3.10 The Data Analysis Themes

The following themes were identified from the participants’ responses:

**Theme 1:** Knowledge/Skills

**Theme 2:** Confidence

**Theme 3:** Personal Background

**Theme 4:** Practical Experiences

**Theme 5:** Reality Gap
Theme 6: Student Characteristics

Theme 7: The School Context

Theme 8: Time Constraints

Theme 9: On-going Support

The definitions of the themes and examples of corresponding responses are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes from the Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 1:</strong> Knowledge/Skills</td>
<td>Participants identify their knowledge and skills as aspects influencing their attitude towards the teaching of students with special educational needs. The need for additional education and concern for lack of personal professional experience was a consistent theme expressed by teachers.</td>
<td>I did not get the preparation necessary to teach in these classrooms. They need special education teachers who have the expertise, training, and previous experience needed to do this job. I don’t feel I have nearly enough training or understanding of the strategies. My experiences have demonstrated that many teachers lack understanding and knowledge in providing an inclusive learning program and environment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Theme 2: Confidence | Participants identify their confidence or lack of confidence in their ability to teach students with special educational needs as a contributing factor affecting their attitude.  
Indicators: Designated when a person talks about:  
• Feeling unprepared to teach students with special educational needs.  
• Lacking confidence in their ability to teach effectively.  
• Feeling confident about their abilities. | I really feel totally unprepared. We really haven’t had the chance to work with many students especially those with special educational needs and I don’t feel very confident about it. I know I am not close to being an expert in this area and I wouldn’t say I am overly confident. So really, I don’t feel very prepared at all. I still don’t feel at all confident or prepared. |
| Theme 3: Personal Background | A person identifies their personal background experience as influencing their attitude towards student with special educational needs.  
Indicators: Designated when a person talks about:  
• Personal experiences with students with special educational needs.  
• Prior knowledge working with students with | My brother went to a special school so that gave me an insight into the system. I feel really well prepared for teaching students with special educational needs but only because of my experience as an Education Assistant. I used to go and help my Mum at school and that was extreme but it really helped me to understand these students. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 4: Practical Experiences</th>
<th>The person identifies the practical experiences they have received through university as influencing their attitude.</th>
<th>I had a student with special needs in one of my prac classes but I didn’t work directly with him. There wasn’t any opportunity on my practical experiences to really understand the needs of these students. I think we need to have the opportunity to apply this knowledge through practical experiences. I feel like we need more practical experiences with these students to be able to cater for them.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 4:</strong> Practical Experiences</td>
<td>The person identifies the practical experiences they have received through university as influencing their attitude.</td>
<td>I had a student with special needs in one of my prac classes but I didn’t work directly with him. There wasn’t any opportunity on my practical experiences to really understand the needs of these students. I think we need to have the opportunity to apply this knowledge through practical experiences. I feel like we need more practical experiences with these students to be able to cater for them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 5:</strong> Reality Gap</td>
<td>The person identifies the gap between theory learned at university and the practical situation in the classroom as influencing their attitude.</td>
<td>Starting teachers need to be better prepared for the reality of schools. I have many concerns about the reality of teaching students with special educational needs. I feel like everything I learnt at</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Theme 6:** Student Characteristics | The participant identifies the student characteristics as contributing aspects influencing their attitude.  
**Indicators:** Designated when a person talks about:  
• The severity of a student’s disability.  
• The type of disability.  
• Catering for different needs and abilities.  
• The individual needs of the child. | It will all depend on the needs of the child.  
I think specific problems need specific training so you can understand and cope with it.  
The student’s disability is also important.  
It will be difficult for me to deal with both types of students [with and without disabilities]. |
| **Theme 7:** The School Context | The participant must identify the school context as an influencing factor contributing to their attitude towards students with special educational needs. | Will the school be supportive or will I be on my own?  
I am concerned that I may not have access to many resources and I won’t feel supported. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 8: Time Constraints</th>
<th>Indicators: Designated when a person talks about:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• School resources and personnel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Principal and Administration support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Inclusive culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Attitudes of the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I hope my Principal will be there and I won’t just be left on my own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The inclusive school where I was on prac was fantastic and very supportive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Limited time available to teach students with special educational needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Spending too much or not enough time on students with special educational needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Extra time required to plan and program for students with special educational needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Not enough time to support students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 9:</th>
<th>The participant identifies the</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I want to be sure that I can still</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 8: Time Constraints</th>
<th>The person identifies time constraints as influencing their attitude towards students with special educational needs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indicators: Designated when a person talks about:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Limited time available to teach students with special educational needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Spending too much or not enough time on students with special educational needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Extra time required to plan and program for students with special educational needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Not enough time to support students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They need more attention and time than other students and this is going to mean that I will have to sacrifice time with other students and that’s not fair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t think students with special educational needs will get enough attention or time and then if they do, the rest of the class misses out and perhaps I will be letting them down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am worried about the extra time to plan and program that will be involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I feel that any child with special educational needs, whatever those needs are, will take up more time than—I don’t like to say a normal child—but the general run of the mill type of child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-going Support need for on-going support and education as a contributing factor affecting their attitude. Indicators: Designated when a person talks about: • The desire to continue their education after university. • Needing further support once they start teaching. • Wanting to access courses and professional development opportunities.</td>
<td>develop my skills in teaching students with special educational needs once I leave university. I am hoping that I will be able to attend some courses or something in the future. I feel the student teachers need to be introduced to the network of support available to them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.11 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability have been considered carefully throughout the research. As Merriam states:

> Many writers on the topic argue that qualitative research, which is based on different assumptions about reality and a different worldview, should consider validity and reliability from a perspective congruent with the philosophical assumptions underlying the paradigm. This may even result in naming the concepts themselves differently. (1998, p.200)

To ensure the reliability of this study, the use of strategies suggested by Merriam (1998) was applied to ensure internal validity. These included member-checks, peer examination, and researcher’s bias. The use of data collection methods including
interviews and focus groups ensured a greater depth of investigation. Member-checks occurred throughout the study between the participants and the researcher to make sure the data and interpretations were accurate. Peer examination among colleagues and the researcher allowed discussion on the findings as they appeared, while explicit statements regarding the researcher’s bias clarified any assumptions about the study.

According to Merriam (1998), external validity produces results that may be generalised by the reader or user. Readers generalise when aspects of the findings apply to their own needs or situations. To enhance the external validity, this study used rich and broad description so that transferability was possible by the reader. Merriam (1998) explains that providing the readers with a rich broad description will allow them “to determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether findings can be transferred” (p.211).

3.12 Limitations

This study used convenience sampling. Therefore, generalizability of results may be limited due to the sampling method. Moreover, this study used a cross-sectional approach, and not a longitudinal design. A longitudinal design implies studying the same group of participants over a particular period of time, while a cross-sectional design implies studying groups of participants in different age or class standing groups at the same point in time. Although in a cross-sectional design the researcher does not follow the development of each participant in the group, rich data on age change or group effects may be missed.
Chapter 4 Findings of the Study

Beginning teachers need not only the skills and knowledge base to be successful in inclusive environments, but also need to develop positive attitudes and sentiments towards their work in this area in order to ensure an inclusive future in their classrooms. (Loreman, Earle, Sharma & Forlin 2007, p.150)

4.1 Introduction

Previous research has shown that beginning teachers are acknowledging that the pressure to accommodate students with special educational needs into their general education classrooms as one of the more significant challenges they face and they often feel unprepared. For inclusion to be successful, research has shown that teachers need to have confidence in their skills, knowledge and abilities to meet the individual challenges that they will inevitably face (Jobling & Moni, 2004; Winter, 2006; Bradshaw & Mundia, 2006; Subban & Sharma, 2006). With this in mind, it is important to understand that teacher attitudes towards students with special educational needs can directly influence the success of the students and those with negative attitudes are less likely to implement strategies that promote inclusive education. In preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms, there is a need to ensure that teachers’ attitudes, beliefs, expectations and acceptance of students with special educational needs are positive and successful (Angelides, 2008; Winter, 2006). Previous studies have also shown that positive teacher attitudes are essential for the success of educating students with special educational needs in regular education classrooms and teacher education programs should emphasize and concentrate on enhancing teachers’
attitudes towards inclusion (Kauffmann & Hallahan, 1981; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Palmer, 2006).

Initially, this research was conducted to further explore pre-service and beginning teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness to teach students with special educational needs in mainstream schools and provide further depth and insight into the perspectives behind the survey results shown in previous studies. It also explored their attitudes toward the inclusion of students with special educational needs in general education classrooms and the variables associated with these attitudes (e.g. nature of the disability, contact with people with disabilities, and beneficial components of their teacher education program). Throughout the research, the beginning teachers discussed their perceptions of their teacher preparation and the teaching of students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms. They discussed their attitudes and beliefs about inclusion and this highlighted their attitudes towards students with special educational needs and how these attitudes were influenced by many aspects such as their concerns, level of support and the students’ characteristics.

As reviewed in chapter two, teachers’ attitudes have been found to be strongly influenced by aspects such as the nature and severity of the disabling conditions of the learners, teacher education, and the availability of physical and human resources. As the process of data analysis was conducted, it became clear that the attitude of beginning teachers was the most predominant aspect to consider when looking at the preparation of beginning teachers for the inclusion of students with special educational needs. Through the exploration of these attitudes toward the inclusion of
students with special educational needs in general education classrooms, a number of aspects were identified as common viewpoints (e.g. student characteristics, personal background, and knowledge and skills). These themes were detailed in the previous chapter and an overview is displayed in Figure 2 which has been titled ‘The Aspects of Preparedness Influencing Teacher Attitudes’ as it shows the connections made between the significant themes identified in the data and the teachers’ attitudes towards students with special needs. The individual themes identified in Figure 2 will be discussed in greater depth with participant responses highlighted.

Figure 2. The Aspects of Preparedness Influencing Teacher Attitudes
4.2 Discussion of Themes

1. Knowledge / Skills

Throughout the research, the beginning teachers discussed their perceptions of aspects of preparedness and their underlying attitudes towards students with special educational needs. These attitudes, both positive and negative, were influenced by many aspects of preparedness such as their confidence, level of support and the characteristics of the students with special needs. The majority of beginning teachers were supportive of the idea of inclusion and felt positively towards students with special educational needs. These teachers are willing and motivated to include these students in their classroom, but feel they would be more confident and better able to cater for these students effectively if they had more education and support. One teacher commented:

If we are offering an inclusive environment then I strongly believe a student with special educational needs is just as much a part of the class as the rest of the students and deserves the same respect, acceptance and inclusion and I want to achieve this in my classroom. I really get frustrated by classrooms where the student spends the majority of their time away from the very class they are supposed to be a part of (Participant 7).

While over half the participants have positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs, their attitude towards teaching these students was constrained by their perceptions of their lack of knowledge and skills required to successfully teach these students. These teachers felt they needed more education and practical
experience at university as well as greater support mechanisms once they have graduated and move towards their own teaching position. One teacher commented:

I don’t feel at all well prepared. Two years ago I had a child with slightly autistic tendencies and I did some reading, I did some talking to people to try and find out the best strategies for dealing with this pupil. I tend to try to find out as the need arises. I don’t know what my new class holds next year, though I know there are special educational needs children in that class. I haven’t had any training, so I don’t feel prepared (Participant 5).

Although the participants were feeling insufficiently prepared to teach in inclusive classrooms, numerous pre-service teachers expressed their willingness to teach in these classrooms and positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs. A pre-service teacher wrote:

I did not get the preparation necessary to teach in these classrooms. However, if our teacher education program was developed more effectively to provide us with the teaching skills needed for inclusion, I might be ready to teach students with special educational needs in my classroom. The university course gave me a whole heap of theory which I think will be great but I really needed more practical strategies to apply some of the things I learnt (Participant 4).

Not all beginning teachers held the same positive attitudes however, with two teachers commenting that they really don’t want to teach students with special educational needs because they don’t feel confident or knowledgeable enough to cater for them effectively. One teacher wrote:
Students with special educational needs will be in classrooms. You cannot always use the same strategies that have proven effective with students in general education to teach them and I am worried that I do not have enough of these strategies in my repertoire. They need special education teachers who have the expertise, training, and previous experience needed to do this job (Participant 2).

Throughout the responses, the majority of participants were not satisfied with the level of education general educationalists had related to teaching in inclusive classrooms which influenced their attitude towards inclusion. They believed that general education teachers lacked skills, experience, and education that would be necessary to teach in inclusive settings. A pre-service teacher stated:

I don’t think that general teachers are ready to teach students with special educational needs in their classrooms. Those students need well prepared teachers who have the skill and the training related to inclusion. In the inclusive settings, students’ needs are diverse and vary according to their abilities and disabilities. Special strategies are needed in these settings and teachers in general education classrooms do not have adequate expertise to do that (Participant 6).

Four of the pre-service teachers’ negative attitudes towards inclusion resulted from their concerns about their knowledge and education. To understand this apprehension further, the participants were asked if they believe that general education teachers have sufficient expertise/education to teach in inclusive settings. The responses indicated the participants were concerned about their knowledge and education and
felt they needed more resources, education, and professional development. Furthermore, when asked to reflect on the current teacher education program and its effectiveness in preparing them, they reported that not enough information related to disabilities was included in the course. Moreover, they believed that more practical experiences with people with special educational needs would have helped them in their future career as teachers. One participant stated:

I am trying to be confident about teaching these students but inside I am really worried. I don’t feel I have nearly enough training or understanding of the strategies I will need to be able to use with students with special educational needs. I want to be confident about teaching but I haven’t had an opportunity to use these strategies in a classroom with real students with special educational needs (Participant 1).

Another pre-service teacher proposed a reform for the teacher education program to address the needs of pre-service teachers who are willing to teach in inclusive classrooms. She suggested:

I think that teacher educators should work to develop and teach more courses with practical strategies for teaching inclusively and, in general, teaching in diverse classrooms. In our university course, this diversity was covered in such a small part of our program and it is so important. We only touched on how to teach students with learning disabilities for one week. It is not an easy mission and I am afraid of failing (Participant 8).
From these findings, it seems beginning teachers lack confidence in their knowledge and skills to teach in inclusive settings and feel that they need more preparation through their university course in order to achieve this. The confidence teachers have in their knowledge and abilities to teach inclusively and cater effectively for students with special educational needs strongly influence their attitudes towards these students and teaching inclusively. In order to be effective teachers for students with special educational needs, and maintain their positive attitude towards these students, it becomes imperative that some of these concerns are addressed in the future.

2. Confidence

While beginning teachers expressed the need to have specific practical and theoretical knowledge related to teaching, their confidence in their ability to apply this knowledge was also important. Feeling able to teach inclusively implies a feeling of confidence. Beginning teachers offered information about their teacher preparation program as it contributed to their confidence. While the student teachers understood the importance of their coursework, they felt that they needed teaching experience to provide models for inclusion and thereby facilitate their confidence in their ability to work with children who have disabilities. One participant stated:

We really haven’t had the chance to work with many students especially those with special educational needs and I don’t feel very confident about it. I want to do the right thing by them, but I just don’t feel like I have the ability yet and that is really worrying me (Participant 1).
They reported having neither the experience nor the education needed to do this task effectively. In most cases, this lack of expertise/education was considered the major reason for their lack of confidence. Similarly, participants reported feelings of unpreparedness to teach in inclusive settings. Throughout the interviews, the majority of beginning teachers were not comfortable with the level of preparation they had related to curriculum and instruction in inclusive classrooms in particular with practical strategies. Indeed, all beginning teachers reported that their participation in the one course related to inclusion was insufficient. One teacher stated:

I really feel totally unprepared. The university course gave me theory but I have no idea how to transfer this to the classroom. The tutorials were a little more useful for classroom strategies but I still don’t feel at all confident or prepared. There was too much information to cover over such a small time as well (Participant 4).

Beginning teachers reported that their teacher education programs did not provide them with enough experience and knowledge about teaching students with special educational needs either in inclusive classrooms or in isolated settings. Also, when participants were asked about their feelings of preparedness to teach students with special educational needs in their classrooms, all participants stated that they did not feel prepared to teach students with special educational needs in their classroom. This lack of confidence in their knowledge, skills and ability to teach students with special educational needs has directly influenced their apprehension towards the teaching of these students.
3. Personal Background

Half of the pre-service teachers reported having some prior knowledge about students with special educational needs through their practical placements or prior experiences. Their personal and professional life experiences appeared to modify their attitudes and sentiments about students with special educational needs. One participant stated:

My brother went to a special school so that gave me an insight into the system and a close involvement with the teachers. There were certain activities at uni that were good like when we looked at how to organise activities for the student to be included without being segregating like small group work or peer mentoring (Participant 3).

The current study showed that experience in working with children with special educational needs did contribute towards teachers’ attitudes about inclusion. Another participant stated:

I feel really well prepared for teaching students with special educational needs but only because of my experience as an Education Assistant working with these wonderful students. While the Uni course gave me some valuable insights into working with students with special educational needs, I do not feel it prepares beginning teachers enough for the education of these students (Participant 7).

More specifically, it was found that teachers with experience in working with children with special educational needs held more positive attitudes towards their inclusion than their peers without relevant experience. Beginning teachers spoke about
individual experiences as being responsible for changes in their attitudes. One teacher stated:

My Mum is a special education teacher and she has given me some strategies and ideas. I have had a little experience working with students with special educational needs and I really want to help and include them, but at the same time I am worried about telling my employer about my previous experiences in case I get given all the students with behaviour problems and special educational needs. I just hope my first class isn’t too challenging as I don’t feel I really know how to help some students with special educational needs (Participant 1).

For these participants, experiences appeared to have a major role in the development of their attitudes about children with special educational needs and their ability to function in a regular classroom setting. However, they still saw this knowledge as insufficient and still did not feel prepared to teach in inclusive classrooms. One beginning teacher commented:

Even though I have just finished a prac with an autistic student and a full time EA, I still needed more strategies, especially when it comes to dealing with the needs of all students. I had to rely on the other teacher a lot and I felt the support they receive is not enough. I know I am a little better placed than some beginning teachers but it was still quite a shock. While the university course gave me some valuable insights into working with students with special educational needs, I do not feel it prepares beginning teachers enough for the education of these students…I still needed real experience (Participant 5).
Even those participants who reported having a desire to work with students with special educational needs pleaded for more education and experience. Many stated that their education needed to include more practical experiences in general however the majority of participants stated that this aspect of their education was particularly important for students with special educational needs. As one teacher stated:

I would love to do more and have the opportunity to do lots of volunteer work in schools to learn more about applying the theory to knowledge. This is especially important for children with special educational needs as I really feel totally unprepared. I feel that I need to be ready to teach students with special educational needs because I love them and I have much sympathy towards them. However, I need enough training and experience to be able to teach them along with their peers in general education (Participant 4).

The participants also discussed their lack of prior knowledge as a significant factor influencing their attitudes towards students with special educational needs. The previous experience with these students and proper education were considered critical aspects as evidenced by almost all beginning teachers’ responses.

4. Practical Experiences in Teacher Education

During the focus group participants identified professional experiences as contributing to their attitude towards working with children with special educational needs. Beginning teachers in general valued the practical experience for its effectiveness in introducing them to a wide range of teaching skills, but also pointed out some difficulties and limitations. One teacher stated:
There wasn’t any opportunity on my practical experiences to really understand the emotional needs of these students and how to cater for them, what to do with a student with social and emotional difficulties as well as those with undiagnosed special educational needs or those with major behavioural problems. Starting teachers need to be better prepared (Participant 6).

Other participants recommended an extended period of practicum so they have a deeper understanding of all the responsibilities and duties of teachers. They indicated the need for better arrangements of practicum so that they can have more opportunities to observe experienced teachers, and their practical experiences should include some teacher duties, a greater range and variety of skills and a full workload for a period of time towards the end to familiarise the beginning teacher with the real world of teaching. One teacher commented:

I need to go out and see other teachers working with these students. To be able to really watch how they adapt their lessons and what strategies they use would really help. I have ideas but I need to know how other teachers actually put it into practice in the classroom (Participant 3).

Beginning teachers commented about how their teaching placements were often only in general education classrooms and they had limited experience working with any students with special educational needs. They also raised concerns about the depth of information provided in their teacher education course. One beginning teacher commented:
I am not ready to teach in inclusive classrooms because I do not have any previous experience with students with disabilities. I feel a lot more prepared now that I have completed the unit but I only have got the basics and that is not really enough. I think we need to have the opportunity to apply this knowledge through practical experiences. My teacher education program did not provide me with enough knowledge about these students, their skills, abilities, and/or disabilities (Participant 2).

The participants felt that direct experiences with children would be helpful in giving them the opportunity to incorporate theory and apply this in a practical way. While believing that the course work had been helpful in contributing knowledge and understanding about inclusion, a practical component where they would be able to apply practices seemed to be essential in the process of truly understanding inclusion. Over half the pre-service teachers still held positive attitudes and were willing to teach in inclusive classrooms if enough preparation was offered to them. They suggested their teacher education program needs to provide more practical strategies and examples as well as more information about general strategies for teaching in more diverse classrooms.

5. Reality Gap

Participants expressed concern for a need to connect their pre-service education with the reality of their initial teaching experiences and this factor significantly affected their attitude towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs. While it may not be possible for preparation programs to discuss all aspects of teaching, the
theory that relates to practice can help teachers develop intuitive skills in dealing with classroom-related issues. Feeling overwhelmed with too little time to meet teaching demands was an issue raised by many participants which led to more negative attitudes towards inclusion.

To prevent reality shock and support positive attitudes towards inclusion, beginning teachers felt that university should be more realistic about teaching and learning in schools, by explaining the expectations of teachers, the types of classrooms they will encounter and the constraints in schools they may not have been warned about. It was further suggested that a comprehensive base be provided by having discussions with practitioners in the schools in order to share their experience and expertise. One teacher stated:

I have a cousin who is disabled and I know her emotional needs. I know what a teacher will need to provide and I don’t feel I have developed those skills especially when that child is integrated with other children. I have many concerns about the reality of teaching students with special educational needs: the emotional needs of the students and how to cater for them, what to do with student with social and emotional difficulties as well as those with undiagnosed special educational needs or those with major behavioural problems. Starting teachers need to be better prepared for the reality of schools (Participant 1).

Teacher education should also prepare students to cope with the management and administration of classroom as this is the reality of what they need to do each day in their classroom. Participants commented they did not feel skilled enough for when
they enter their classrooms for the first time and this negatively affected their attitude. There was also a strong leaning towards changing the methods that were used to train them and bringing in practising teachers, who are faced with these issues each day, to give them guidance of a more practical nature. As one participant stated:

I really wanted to hear from teachers that are in classrooms all the time working with students and find out how they cater for these students every day. There are so many extra tasks in schools that I know we haven’t yet experienced. How do they fit everything in and what do they do in their classroom for students with special needs? (Participant 4)

While the student teachers understood the importance of their coursework, they felt that they needed teaching experience to provide models for inclusion and thereby facilitate their competence in working with children who have special educational needs. They also felt they needed more opportunities to work with student with special educational needs and understand their needs in the classroom context. One teacher commented:

I feel like everything I learnt at university is out of context. I really needed to be able to put it all together and practice the theory especially with students with special educational needs. I am really not comfortable putting it into practice; I just don’t know what to do (Participant 2).

Providing beginning teachers with the experiences and opportunities in their teacher education to develop confidence and practical skills will support their development of positive attitudes towards these students and the inclusive classroom context.
Beginning teachers need to have experienced all aspects required in their teaching position including the reality of having students with special educational needs in their classes in order to develop positive attitudes. It is vital that these beginning teachers feel positive about their abilities and skills when working with students with special educational needs in order to maintain a positive attitude once they start teaching.

6. The Characteristics of Students with Special Needs

The participants’ attitudes were influenced by a number of aspects such as the student’s individual characteristics and level of special educational needs. They were also concerned about different types of special educational needs and were more willing to accommodate specific children with special educational needs in their classrooms. As a teacher stated:

I think specific problems need specific training so you can understand and cope with it. I think it’s hard to know how to deal with certain types of children. It’s like say, autism. I’ve never had to deal with an autistic child and I think you need to have an understanding of autism itself (Participant 8).

Some teachers felt they may be ready to teach some students with special educational needs as long as they were not severely disabled. A teacher commented:

I don’t feel too bad but it will all depend on the needs of the child. I know I am not even close to being an expert in this area and I wouldn’t say I am overly confident as I have not come across students with severe special educational needs at all. I want to do my best for all my students but I really don’t have the skills. It is quite daunting (Participant 5).
Students with more intensive special educational needs were seen as difficult to teach and beginning teachers felt they needed more education and specialist support to be able to cater for these students effectively. Beginning teachers also felt that they had not been adequately prepared to teach the diversity of real students which will include students with disabilities, learning difficulties and those who are unmotivated and reluctant. One pre-service teacher commented:

The students’ disability is also important. For example, it will be difficult to teach students with hearing and visual impairments as well as students with intellectual disabilities in the same classroom with general education students. Plus, students with emotional and behavioural disorders could be a challenge I am not ready to face (Participant 7).

Beginning teachers face the challenge of creating programs appropriate for students with exceedingly diverse and complex needs. Their responsibilities frequently equal those of their experienced peers—teaching to a broader range of ages and ability levels—but with less strategies, experience and fewer resources. For example, a respondent offered that they were not in favour of inclusive classrooms because of her lack of skills and knowledge and stated that the type of students’ special educational needs were reasons for not supporting inclusive opportunities for children with special educational needs. Another pre-service teacher stated:

It will be difficult for me to deal with both types of students [with and without disabilities] in one classroom. Those students need special skills and teaching strategies that go beyond my abilities. I am not sufficiently prepared to do that. I
am concerned about how well I can manage both the students with special educational needs and the rest of the class. I want to build an inclusive classroom where all students are included but I am not sure how to achieve this effectively (Participant 3).

In summary, although beginning teachers expressed a mostly positive attitude towards teaching students with special educational needs in their classrooms, they had many concerns. Indeed, pre-service teachers were concerned about the level of preparation they were offered in their teacher education program and the education available to in-service teachers after graduation. They were also more willing to accommodate certain types of students with special educational needs. Specifically, they reported being more comfortable teaching students considered to have mild or moderate disabilities (e.g., those with learning or physical disabilities). They were less accepting of students with more severe disabilities (e.g., those with vision, hearing, or cognitive impairments). In their views, beginning teachers did not have the proper preparation, classroom management skills, or experience to accommodate students with special educational needs in their classrooms effectively. It is important to address these concerns and issues before they negatively impact on the teachers attitudes towards students with special educational needs.

7. School Context

The school context was identified as a significant factor influencing the attitudes of beginning teachers towards students with special educational needs. The pressure of large class sizes and limited resources were contributing aspects in the support for
inclusive classrooms. Five of the beginning teachers indicated that inclusion of students with special educational needs is challenging, considering the teacher shortage and the increasing number of students in general education classrooms and this affected their attitudes towards the inclusion of these students. A beginning teacher commented:

It is obvious that general education classrooms are overloaded in terms of student numbers. These increasing numbers of students puts too much pressure on teachers. Consequently, teachers do not have the ability, or even the energy, to participate in professional development related to inclusion or student with disabilities (Participant 4).

Four of the participants were worried about the attitude of others at the school and whether there would be support provided or more negative attitudes towards inclusion of students with special educational needs. The majority of respondents also identified administrative support as a factor contributing to their attitude. When the school has a principal or support staff who all support inclusion, then there is more likely to be a positive environment and more assistance given to beginning teachers which promotes positive attitudes in beginning teachers. One participant discussed:

The inclusive school where I was on prac was fantastic because it was such a positive atmosphere and I really enjoyed the experience but I think it is unfair to expect teachers to be able to cope when they don’t have the strategies or support (Participant 7).
Where the school context was not supportive of the inclusion of students with special educational needs, beginning teachers were less positive and had more negative attitudes towards inclusion. One teacher commented:

The other teachers are a concern as there may be negativity because they don’t see collaboration and support as part of their job or spending time looking into a student’s needs. Will the school be supportive or will I be on my own? I don’t really know but I hope my Principal will be there and I won’t just be left on my own to just do it. I feel like I might fail these kids if that were the case (Participant 3).

Beginning teachers also indicated that schools needed sufficient resources to accommodate students with special educational needs. Indeed, most beginning teachers recognised that schools were lacking appropriate resources to accommodate students with special educational needs and this factor influenced their attitude towards inclusion. They indicated that they were aware that most schools were on a very tight budget and even the school personnel were lacking the appropriate preparation. One beginning teacher stated:

I got the feeling that there would be enough support when you go out into schools but then the teachers laugh hysterically at you, and it makes you realise there is not as much support as there should be. It is nice in theory. I do not believe that our schools are ready, financially and scientifically, for inclusion. I don’t think students with special educational needs will get enough attention and then if they do, the rest of the class misses out and perhaps I will be letting
them down. Also the resources will be a big factor- I am concerned that I may not have access to many resources and I won’t feel supported (Participant 6).

In summary, participants’ attitude towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs was influenced by their concerns about the school context, the school personnel and not having the resources or time needed to allow them to cater effectively for students with special educational needs. Beginning teachers believed that most schools were lacking the financial and human resources needed to support these students and this was a major concern. Unprepared and negative school personnel, lack of appropriate equipment, and large classes were also significant aspects influencing the attitudes of beginning teachers.

8. Time Constraints

Time was considered to be a significant pressure when teaching inclusively, and the supportiveness of the school climate in responding to students with special educational needs was a crucial factor influencing the attitudes of beginning teachers. One factor raised by participants was that learners with special educational needs require special attention and not enough time is available to provide this without putting too much pressure on the teacher or the rest of the class. A participant stated:

There are issues with whole-class planning which aren’t there at the moment. Obviously if you’ve got children like these in your classroom it would be more work, more time needed. When you’re getting sorted with these children that’s time you’re not spending on something else. I feel that any child with special educational needs, whatever those needs are, will take up more time than— I
don’t like to say a normal child—but the general run of the mill type of child (Participant 4).

The respondents identified the pressure they are under to have all their students meet the national benchmarks and were concerned that they would not have time to achieve this while trying to cater for students with special educational needs. Another teacher stated:

Students with disabilities need special attention and they definitely need support. The time factor is a real concern. They need more attention and time than other students and this is going to mean that I will have to sacrifice time with other students and that’s not fair. I know that they need it but I am concerned that I will not get assistance. What can I do to teach without forgetting the rest of the students in the classroom? There are only so many hours in the day and I am worried I won’t be able to fit it all in (Participant 8).

The participants also discussed the time constraints related to the planning and organisation involved with catering for student with special educational needs and the concerns associated with these added pressures. These time constraints were a significant factor influencing the attitudes of beginning teachers and need to be taken into consideration when supporting beginning teachers. The participants also discussed the need for education assistant support time as a concern and influence on their attitude. One participant commented:

I don’t think students with special educational needs will get enough attention and then if they do, the rest of the class misses out and perhaps I will be letting
them down. I am worried about the extra time to plan and program that will be involved. I am concerned I won’t have the time needed to work with the special educational needs student and the rest of the class especially if I don’t have any EA time (Participant 3).

The participants’ attitudes were influenced by a number of aspects such as the student’s level of special educational needs, access to professional development, the reality gap between university and the classroom and the amount of support they will be given at a school level. It is important to address these concerns and issues before they negatively impact on the teachers attitudes towards students with special educational needs.

9. On-going Support

Many beginning teachers felt that schools and the Department of Education needed to provide them with access to necessary workshops for personal and professional development, but mentioned that support efforts tend to deliver everything to beginning teachers prior and at the start of school year and then promptly disappear. One participant commented:

While I am sure there are some good courses available to teachers once I am in the classroom, I am worried that I may not be able to access these. I don’t want to get out there and start teaching and feel like I have been forgotten. I want to be sure that I can still develop my skills in teaching students with special educational needs once I leave university (Participant 5).
The request is for schools make the effort to follow their developing needs and offer professional development opportunities at appropriate times. The need to provide appropriate opportunities at the start of the year for new graduates as well as providing on-going support were issues identified by participants and directly influenced their attitudes towards teaching student with special educational needs.

One participant commented:

While practical skills are easy to pick up and seem easy, they take time to learn and I wish I was given the strategies beforehand. It would reduce the number of mistakes a new teacher makes in addition to the problems encountered. I am hoping that I will be able to attend some courses or something in the future (Participant 2).

Continued professional development opportunities providing teaching strategies and practical support will help new teachers gain the skills they were not taught in teacher preparation programs and through these opportunities, further enhance the development of positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs.

One participant responded:

I don’t think we need to learn more theory at university. I think practical experiences and exposure to these students in the right environment even once we leave university so you don’t give up hope is really important too and that way you get to see the positives for yourself. The cool thing is the knowledge that if you do try these things they might work. When they do work it is amazing (Participant 6).
Beginning teachers also identified the need for ongoing development of skills and strategies through development opportunities like performance management. The research showed that beginning teachers felt they would not have access to enough professional development opportunities in the area of teaching students with special educational needs. Beginning teachers valued networking and collaboration opportunities and support to access relevant professional development workshops and seminars that would help increase their knowledge base and skills. One teacher wrote:

I really think beginning teachers need a mentor or support person you can go to within the school or Education Department so that you are not going out blind. We really need access to support teachers where we can easily access advice. Also, they need to give beginning teachers more time to plan and observe other teachers in order to see the best teaching strategies for these students. If there isn’t the support of other teachers in the school, I know I will really flounder (Participant 7).

The participants also stated that they would not have the skills or the time to plan for the diverse needs of their students and that they feel they would have difficulty organising the numerous, varied tasks of trying to cater for all their students. They felt that they would need ongoing support in this area and hoped the schools or the Education Department would provide this for them.

4.3 Conclusion.

Differing perceptions and contributing aspects of preparedness and have impacted on teacher attitudes towards the education of students with special educational needs
and teachers’ confidence to cater effectively for these students. Teachers who are confident in their abilities, feel comfortable in their ability to adapt their teaching style, lessons and assessments and are supported in their classroom have more positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs and are more willing to include these students in their classrooms. The inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms is a reality throughout Australia and beginning teachers need to be approaching their first classroom posting with positive attitudes in order for these teachers to feel capable of teaching student with special educational needs effectively. Once in their classroom, these teachers need mentors and school support to maintain these positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs and teaching in general.

The foremost response from the research showed that beginning teachers do not feel they are adequately prepared to teach in inclusive classrooms and this will have a negative effect on their attitudes towards students with special educational needs. As one participant demonstrated through his comment:

I’m NOT prepared to teach these kids!!! I really feel totally unprepared. The uni course gave me theory but I have no idea how to transfer this to the classroom.

The tutorials were a little more useful for classroom strategies but I still don’t feel at all confident or prepared (Participant 8).

While most participants have positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs, they feel they lack the skills and knowledge required to successfully teach these students. These teachers felt they needed more education and practical
experience at university as well as greater support mechanisms once they have graduated and move towards their own teaching position. In order to be effective teachers for students with special educational needs, and maintain their positive attitude towards these students, it is clearly becomes imperative that some of these concerns are addressed in the future.
Chapter 5 Discussions and Conclusion

In addition to gaining formal and practical knowledge during their training, teachers need to have developed positive values, supportive ideals, high moral principles and strong ethical understandings regarding accepting responsibility for the education of all children regardless of the diversity of their needs.

(Forlin, 2010, p.649)

5.1 Introduction

Inclusion is now a reality in Western Australia and the classroom teacher is often the overriding factor in the success of inclusion. Teachers with a positive or enthusiastic attitude, a flexible teaching approach and the motivation to accept responsibility for the learning of the student consistently create successful inclusive classrooms (Brown et al., 2010; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). The first professional experiences of new teachers will help to form their attitudes towards their students, the profession and themselves as educators. With many teachers leaving their career in their first five years, it is essential for these initial experiences to be positive and rewarding encounters (Nahal, 2010, p.2). In order to achieve this goal, beginning teachers need to be effectively prepared for the inclusive classroom setting. This investigation explored beginning teachers’ perceptions regarding their preparation, in relation to inclusion and their attitudes about teaching students with special educational needs. The study findings indicated that beginning teachers’ perceptions and attitudes are underpinned by often interrelated aspects including personal knowledge, background and
experiences, the support available, time constraints, the student characteristics and the school context.

These findings made it clear that it is imperative to make changes to minimise the negative associations of having students with special educational needs in the mainstream classroom and educate teachers to enable them to successfully make teaching and learning adjustments to effectively accommodate these students (Jordan, Schwartz & McGhie-Richmond, 2009). Given the intricate nature of the aspects shaping teacher attitudes toward inclusion, the importance of effective supports for beginning teachers have been highlighted in this study. As Woodcock (2013) stated, a starting point “towards redressing the situation is for tertiary institutions to better prepare future teachers with the skills, perceptions and knowledge to teach students with special needs” (p.25). Teacher education programs, in preparation for inclusion of students with special educational needs, could focus on improving the confidence of beginning teachers, and reducing their concerns by increasing their understanding and confidence in meeting the needs of diverse learners (Bartak & Fry, 2004; Gary, Leon, Garvan & Reid, 2002; Gould & Vaughn, 2000; Jahnukainen & Korhonen, 2003; Westwood & Graham, 2003). The challenge for teacher education institutions is to involve beginning teachers in reflecting on their own personal beliefs and attitudes and then to support them in developing a more positive approach towards inclusion (Forlin, 2006), yet, clearly, this challenge must be addressed if new graduates are to be better prepared for the rapidly changing needs of diverse students in mainstream schools today (Sharma, Forlin, Loreman & Earle, 2006). Research has demonstrated that a key component for effective and successful implementation of inclusive
education lies in teacher attitudes toward students with special needs (Avramidis et al. 2000a; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Hadadian & Chiang, 2007; Van Reusen, Shooh & Barker, 2001). A more positive attitude is held by teachers who have had exposure to courses in teaching children with special educational needs. Cook (2002) and Silverman (2007) point out that teachers’ attitudes and beliefs directly affect their behaviour with students and so have a great influence on classroom climate and student outcomes. Teachers who hold a more positive attitude toward inclusive education also tend to have more success in including children with special educational needs into their classrooms. Developing and supporting a beginning teacher’s commitment to meet the needs of all of their students, will assist these teachers to make the necessary changes to their attitudes towards inclusion, provide them with the confidence to formulate new ideas, and develop strategies to implement in their classroom (Andrews, 2002; Reinke & Moseley, 2002).

When the study was first commenced, the intent was to gain a deeper understanding of beginning teachers’ perceptions of preparedness for teaching and the attitudes of beginning teachers towards teaching students with special educational needs and to examine their perceptions about ways in which they might best be supported. By interviewing the beginning teachers about their perceptions regarding students with special educational needs and how prepared they perceive they are to teach these students in inclusive classrooms, the research identified how some teachers perceive educating students with special educational needs could be further improved. From the data collected, the research ascertained the aspects of the beginning teachers’ preparation that are seen as most beneficial in supporting their teaching of students
with special educational needs in inclusive settings and how their preparation may influence beginning teachers’ attitudes towards these students. As the study progressed it became clear that their responses reflected the beginning teachers’ attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs and that the implications of these attitudes were not limited to just their university education alone, but to induction processes, policy making and other practitioners. It can be inferred that positive teacher attitudes about inclusion are developed and formed in the university years and in the experiences prior to attending university but are often changed or impacted once new experiences are gained as a beginning teacher. Therefore, it is necessary for university education institutions to carefully examine the types of experiences students have prior to and during student teaching. If the students receive positive, yet realistic experiences, their attitudes towards inclusion would be enhanced and hopefully, more children with special educational needs will benefit from their teaching. In examining the teacher education programs, it is possible to notice that inclusion encourages the blend of special education and mainstream general education. The teacher preparation programs could therefore demonstrate the blend of appropriate information about diverse abilities and needs across the total curriculum instead of relying on one course in the area of inclusive education to address the entire scope of information for future teachers. As students engage in practical experiences, these could include opportunities for future teachers to work with a broad range of students with various capabilities. The tertiary preparation programs could model and promote collaboration and cooperative learning in order for these experiences to enable the translation of theory into practice. The programs
should also provide planning, implementation, reflection and evaluation opportunities to encourage the development of reflective teachers.

Preparation programs could be encouraged to provide instruction in evidence based teaching practices for students with special educational needs including explicit instruction and differentiation as well as practice in effective collaboration with support staff and professionals. This also involves providing access to high quality, ongoing professional learning opportunities for university lecturers to stay current with the educational research base into effective instructional practices. When preparing teachers for the inclusive setting, assignments need to challenge the beginning teacher’s ability to reflect critically and encourage them to challenge what may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable subjects and attitudes. Coursework needs to include practical experiences with many available opportunities to work with individuals with special educational needs. Further, the recording of thoughts, reflections, and observations experienced during the inclusive education course develops individual growth and perception. In addition to the traditional methods of readings, tutorials and class lectures, expert guest lecturers can be introduced to provide a realistic viewpoint on topics. Group and individual research can be established as it not only increases the amount of information covered, but it also imitates the relationships and work necessary in the inclusive classroom. A portfolio containing the information gained and shared during the course assists the beginning teacher once they enter the profession by providing them with a toolbox of useful strategies and ideas. While many aspects of the teacher preparation courses offered to beginning teacher contain
effective and successful aspects, the inclusion of these more diverse teaching strategies will help to support the development of more inclusive teaching practices.

The data from the research also indicated that beginning teachers need opportunities to collaborate on inclusive programs in their schools. Teachers need adequate guidance from tertiary preparation programs and professional learning opportunities that will help them develop skills for effective collaboration and for implementing inclusive practices. They also need initial and ongoing support from administrators, peers and colleagues in order to successfully implement these strategies and maintain confidence in their ability to teach students with special educational needs. Last, and possibly most important, all educators need to be involved in the planning and implementation of an inclusive program. Without careful and systematic planning and coordination from all involved personnel, inclusion is sure to be unsuccessful and students with special educational needs will be the ones to fail.

The results of this investigation emphasise teachers' perceptions that if inclusion is to work, they must be educated to recognise and to meet the needs of students who have special educational needs and are placed in mainstream classrooms. Beginning teachers want to be made aware, through teacher preparation and professional development, of the differences among students who have diverse educational needs (Andrews, 2002; Reinke & Moseley, 2002). Loreman, Forlin & Sharma (2007) stated that if pre-service teachers are going to develop positive attitudes towards inclusive education, they need opportunities for interaction with people with disabilities, instruction on policy and legislation relating to inclusive education, and opportunities
to gain confidence in practical teaching situations with students with disabilities. Teachers need to be taught accommodative strategies that they can use to meet the needs of students with special educational needs, and they need to be taught how to apply these teaching strategies in their own classroom (Elhoweris & Alsheikh, 2006). Beginning teachers need to be given opportunities to identify the abilities and skills of the students with special educational needs rather than focusing on the deficits of the student, as this will support the development of positive attitudes towards these students (Loreman, 2010). Therefore, it is essential that universities and those responsible for teacher preparation provide the appropriate education and experience in both the university and classroom context (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Shade & Stewart, 2001). Teacher educators could also model a positive attitude toward inclusion and respect for other professional opinions in order to foster these attitudes more effectively.

This study has revealed that the most important predictors of successful inclusion of students with special educational needs are the attitudes of beginning teachers and the perceptions they have in their preparation and their ability to successfully teach these students. The review of literature also confirmed the existence of a substantial link between beginning teachers’ attitudes and their instructional practice (Avramidis et al. 2000; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Hadadian & Chiang, 2007; Van Reusen et al., 2001). The success of inclusion in mainstream classrooms requires that beginning teachers feel prepared and confident to work with students with special educational needs. Loreman et al. (2007) stress that pre-service teacher education is vital to the continued development and success of inclusive educational practices (Dev, 2002;
Loreman et al., 2005). Teacher preparation courses need to support beginning teachers in gaining an understanding of students with special educational needs, in order to increase their comfort level with diverse learners overall and their confidence to teach inclusively (Campbell et al., 2003; Cook, 2002). There should be continuous teacher preparation and professional learning opportunities focusing on attitudes that enable all teachers to work effectively with students who may have special educational needs. The effective preparation of beginning teachers needs to be a priority if the educational system is to move towards genuinely meeting the needs of all learners, and fulfilling the promise of inclusion (Loreman et al. 2007).

The important step to take now is to make appropriate links between these concerns and the support systems needed to alleviate them. These considerations must account for the range of teaching variables and the diversity of students in mainstream classrooms, and will require all involved to engage in collaborative efforts that will support the professional development of beginning teachers. By providing beginning teachers with the support they need to fulfil their potential as educators, and help students with special educational needs to have the most opportunities to learn, it is possible to make a difference in the lives of both teachers and students (Ainscow, 2008). In summary, although it is recognised that teachers play a crucial role in shaping the overall attitudes towards students with special educational needs in classrooms, there also needs to be focus placed on redesigning teacher preparation programs, school communities and induction programs to facilitate more positive attitudes and feelings in the interactions between teachers and students with special educational needs (Andrews, 2002; Reinke & Moseley, 2002). Specific aspects have been shown to
influence how teachers interact with students with special educational needs and these ultimately impact not only on the education of the student, but also on their social and emotional wellbeing (Pearson, 2009). Teacher preparation courses need to be aware of these aspects and plan appropriately in order to ultimately improve the classroom practices of future teachers. In the current education system, every classroom will include a student with diverse needs, and every teacher is required to make teaching and learning adjustments to meet the needs of these students. It is vital that teachers have confidence in their abilities and the knowledge and skills in inclusive education to meet the individual challenges that they will face in the present school environment. Teacher education institutions have a responsibility to both teachers and their students to ensure that beginning teachers are adequately prepared for the task of educating all students within the regular education classroom. Furthermore, continuing professional development and support for beginning teachers is essential to the maintenance of the quality of education for all in Western Australian schools. It is also noted that these findings may potentially lead to further research into ways to support the education of students with special educational needs and beginning teachers.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

Before examining the overall implications of these findings for further research, and considering ways in which the findings of this study might be extended, there is value in considering the limitations of the current research. These limitations are concerned
with the instrument used for collecting data, the sample size of participants, the administration of the collection of data, and the analysis of the data.

In relation to the validity and reliability of the study, several limitations need to be considered. Firstly, the interview guide was developed from the research questions and open ended interview questions. A small number of participants were used in this study and the participant sample was limited to twenty beginning teachers which meant very little diversity in gender, race, or location and therefore generalisation of this information to other contexts should be undertaken with caution. Another limitation of the study is the self-reported nature of the information that is provided by the respondents. The findings of this study are valid to the extent that the self-reported information is accurate. The accuracy of self-reported personal or other information has been extensively researched in the past and is still researched in the context of educational and social research due to the lack of conclusive findings. Another significant limitation for the findings of the study is that all participants received their qualifications from the same university; therefore, generalisations of the attitudes and concerns of these teachers should be restricted to students and graduates of similar programs with an inclusive focus for the teaching of students with special educational needs.

As a result, it seems that there are a number of limitations on the extent to which these findings might be utilised. With acknowledgement of these concerns, the discussion now turns to the implications of the findings of the study review for the professional preparation of teachers, and for further research, where the issues raised
in the current study might be examined. The implications also extend beyond the immediate findings of this study but are consistent and supported by the findings of the literature in this area.

5.3 Implications and Recommendations for Tertiary Teacher Education

For tertiary institutions, the challenge is to develop education programs that successfully prepare beginning teachers with theory, pedagogical knowledge, and the skills and practices necessary for successful teaching (Korthagen, 2004). It is important for tertiary institutions to allow beginning teachers to experience the skills and strategies they will need to apply in their first year of teaching through practical application and support their transition into schools. Teacher preparation programs also need to provide beginning teachers with the opportunity to work with exemplary teachers and experience success in working in inclusive environments, as these experiences have been found to have a highly significant impact on beginning teachers’ attitudes (Ainscow, 2008). Teacher education programs need to consider beginning teacher placements in appropriate schools and classrooms where inclusion has been incorporated as a philosophy and practice, and where suitable supports exist to help ensure a successful experience for beginning teachers. This practice is consistent with the findings of Zanandrea and Rizzo (1998) who observed that competence in teaching children with special educational needs is associated with more accepting attitudes toward inclusion.

Beginning teachers in the investigation who had some previous experience of teaching students with special educational needs in school settings had more positive attitudes
toward including students with special educational needs into regular classrooms. It is therefore crucial that a practical component is included in teacher education programmes and that beginning teachers are presented with opportunities to teach students with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms and practice the strategies that make these classrooms inclusive (Loreman, Sharma & Forlin, 2013; Woodcock, 2013). This would not only enhance their confidence in teaching students with special educational needs but it will also reduce their concerns about including students with a range of diverse needs into inclusive classrooms since this was the main aspect that was identified as beneficial by participants. The fear of the unknown can cause stress and concern for some beginning teachers and a practical component in tertiary education programs may alleviate some of these apprehensions. It seems that previous experience with people with special educational needs has a significant effect on the way teachers view their students with special educational needs and this should be considered in the development of tertiary education courses.

These and similar strategies allow beginning teachers to work with exemplary teachers who are using effective inclusive strategies, practice using these strategies themselves, and receive feedback on their performance. Finally, educators in teacher education programs must promote students' positive attitudes toward students with special educational needs, as well as an overall positive attitude toward inclusion. Both the attitudes toward inclusion and people with special educational needs may be related to the effectiveness of these teachers in inclusive classrooms in the future. Providing opportunities for beginning teachers to reflect on their success in practical teaching
situations would also make an important contribution to improving their attitudes and supporting their future success.

Teachers’ education programs are obligated to place an emphasis on promoting positive teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion. Research has demonstrated that the attitudes of pre-service teachers can be positively influenced by courses in inclusive education (Andrews, 2002; Reinke & Moseley, 2002; Shade & Stewart, 2001). The research has shown that effective teacher education programs in the area of special educational needs education may include: a course on the characteristics of diverse learners and strategies for working with students with special educational needs; a course with a fieldwork component to allow student teachers to work with students with special educational needs; and strategies for teaching students with special educational needs embedded in the education courses throughout a multiple subject program (Jordan et al., 2009).

Graduates should be able to cater for the wide variation in characteristics and needs of all learners. This includes an ability to diagnose individual learning needs and adapt their approaches and subject content to suit the individual learning needs of all students... They need to know the special education requirements of students with disabilities, including the role of support staff (Australian Council of Deans in Education, 1998, p.7).

Given that almost all teachers will have students with special educational needs in their classrooms, the beginning teacher needs to possess a variety of skills that must include the ability to adapt and modify the physical environment, instructional
materials, the method of presentation, assessment strategies, and also provide encouragement and support to students with special educational needs (Lewis & Norwich, 2005). Educating teachers with the necessary skills for inclusion, accommodations, instructional strategies, and behaviour management will likely improve their attitudes and support the development of their willingness to teach students with special educational needs. Increasing the knowledge base of beginning teachers about students with special educational needs and ways to meet their learning needs can be a good strategy to promote positive attitudes toward inclusion (Shoho, Katims & Wilks, 1997) although beginning teachers need to be able to translate this theory into practice.

1. Beginning Teachers Need to Know How to Adapt Theory to Practice

The beginning teachers in the study felt that they could have been better prepared for their teacher roles if they knew how to effectively convert their theoretical learning from their education to actual instructional and management behaviours and strategies. The teachers felt they needed the opportunity to intentionally blend their theory, disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and practice in their university course. It will also be important for the beginning teacher to develop problem-solving skills related to a variety of inclusive situations so that their beliefs will be embedded and they will develop even more confidence in addressing the different barriers (Stoiber, Gettinger & Goetz, 1998) they may encounter as a beginning teacher. The addition of more inclusive strategies in other aspects of the education course rather
than remaining as a separate aspect of the course could also be developed to support the translation of theory into other areas of teaching.

The research demonstrated that the teachers who had some experience in teaching students with special educational needs in mainstream school settings were more confident about including students with special educational needs into their classrooms. These findings reflect previous research suggesting teacher preparation programs should provide “opportunities for authentic face-to-face interactions and practical teaching experiences with students with disabilities in inclusive settings” (Loreman, Sharma & Forlin, 2013, p 42). It may, therefore, be beneficial to include a practical component in teacher education programmes where beginning teachers are exposed to ways of supporting students with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms and the strategies that are used to make these classrooms inclusive. This would not only enhance their confidence in teaching inclusively but it will also reduce their concerns about including students with a range of special educational needs into inclusive classrooms since this was the main aspect of their education that was identified as beneficial by participants. The relationship, then, between the field experience placements and the teacher education program is important in that placement should offer diverse settings and use a common language regarding inclusive teaching in the classroom.

The practical application of ideas and knowledge in a positive, successful and supportive environment will allow teachers to see and feel the benefits of working with students with special educational needs and facilitate the development of
effective teaching strategies. When beginning teachers are able to work in a successful inclusive classroom, they will be able to translate the theory and knowledge gained through their program, to develop their confidence about teaching. Successful individuals with special educational needs can also be invited as guest speakers to talk about their experiences and to explain how they compensated for their disability (Salend, 2001). Course assignments in which students implement specific strategies in an individual or small group situation in combination with extensive field experiences prior to student teaching would assist further in influencing positive beliefs about inclusion. To teach acceptance of individual differences, teacher education programs may be able to use a disability simulation strategy (Salend, 2001, p.165), which gives beginning and practicing teachers an opportunity to experience how it feels to have a disability.

The overall picture from the research is for more opportunities during teacher education to learn practical applications of theories in simulated class experiences, case studies and practical experiences. As suggested by one of the beginning teachers, one way the teacher education programme could be improved is for trainees to carry out research projects related to a variety of teaching situations in the school. The design of assignments that link the content of courses with application in the real classroom is equally important since the linking of knowledge through application to practical situations results in deeper learning. Although all university education programs are required to include a course about teaching students with special educational needs, teacher education programs may need to include more diverse learning styles and instructional strategies in all courses of educational pedagogy.
(Wolpert, 2001). The development of inclusive strategies like differentiation in all aspects of teacher education could limit the extent of concerns beginning teachers have about how to apply their knowledge and cater effectively for students with special educational needs. The initial teaching years are the influential years and crucial in the development of positive beliefs and attitudes, as these will likely be challenged once beginning teachers enter their profession (Hodkinson, 2006).

2. Preparation in the Practice of All Teacher Duties

The frustration and anxiety created by feeling unprepared for the realities of teaching and the effort to deal with these matters can interfere with the ability of beginning teachers to reflect on their teaching, to improve on their instructional skills and to expand on their professional knowledge (Flores & Day, 2006). Beginning teachers will be more confident concerning their practice and will be able to be more effective if they have the security of knowing how to deliver effective lessons and at least have the basic skills of class management and organisation for learning. When entering the profession for the first time, most teachers find the transition quite stressful and their confidence in their knowledge, abilities and skills will directly influence their overall success. If the beginning teacher feels confident in their ability to teach effectively, they are more likely to be positive and will cope more effectively with the demands of teaching (Little, 1995).

The teachers in the study were not suggesting that university should have given them the solution to every problem they might encounter in their first year but that university should provide them with relevant practical knowledge and skills that could
be adapted and used. The university teacher education programme should provide experiences that are context embedded and all learning must be related to the real school situation (Ainscow, 2008).

3. Teachers Need the Opportunity to Experience a Variety of Settings

Beginning teachers need various opportunities to observe different teaching and learning styles, to interact with students of different abilities, backgrounds and motivations, and to see how teachers cope with their multiple roles. Each school and classroom provides a different dynamic of experiences and opportunities for beginning teachers to participate in and the universities could ensure a greater depth of understanding through these placements if they were more selectively chosen to support this learning. The opportunity for beginning teachers to experience effective inclusive classrooms and work with experienced teachers will contribute to their confidence and this will support the development of positive attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs. Providing beginning teachers with a rich background of practical experiences will support the development of more confident and positive teachers who have the ability to adapt their skills to a variety of situations and roles (Loreman, Sharma & Forlin, 2013; Woodcock, 2013).

Beginning teachers in this study suggested the university practicum needed to include the more complex and realistic roles of the teacher, including teaching experiences with students of diverse abilities, some experience in collaborating with other professionals and support staff, and greater familiarisation to the routine duties of teachers. By enabling beginning teachers to experience a diversity of teaching
experiences and practical placements, they will be able to develop a wider repertoire of pedagogical skills, and develop more confidence in their ability to teach students with special educational needs.

4. The Experience of Working with Exceptional Teachers

The suggestion from the results of the study is that pre-service teachers value the skill of experienced, knowledgeable teachers. The beginning teachers who were fortunate enough to have the support and guidance of experienced teachers as role models, felt more secure and comfortable, and entered teaching feeling more confident and more open to teaching students with special educational needs. The beginning teachers also acknowledged the importance of the ability to work with successful inclusive teachers in order to see the skills and strategies they used to cater for students with special educational needs effectively (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Zanandrea & Rizzo 1998; Hodge & Jansma, 2000).

University education courses should allow beginning teachers the opportunity to work with exemplary teachers in their tutorials and workshops in order to provide opportunities to link the theory with practical examples outside of their teaching practicum. Careful examination should be given by universities and the schools as to how to achieve this goal successfully.

5.4 Implications and Recommendations for Schools

A challenge for all educators is learning to effectively educate our students with special educational needs equitably and appropriately. The identification and understanding of the special learning requirements of a student who has special educational needs
plays a critical role in designing an appropriate educational program and providing the social, emotional and behavioural support necessary for that student. Education and professional development opportunities could therefore be provided to help teachers develop a repertoire of effective teaching and management strategies and how they can be effectively used to benefit students with special educational needs (Avarmidis & Norwich, 2002). Teachers can also be educated to work with differentiated instruction techniques that would benefit all students within the diverse ability mainstream classroom. Professional learning opportunities could be developed for teachers already out the classroom to help build their confidence and knowledge when working with students with special educational needs, and enable beginning teachers to access relevant information and strategies for the specific context of their school. Schools, administrators, colleagues and beginning teachers could work together to increase collaboration with specialist teachers or other exemplary teachers within their community that are more experienced with working with students with special educational needs (Ammah & Hodge, 2005). This will enable teachers to learn additional strategies and techniques that they can use within their classrooms.

1. The Opportunity for Beginning Teachers to Observe Others

Through the observation of other teachers, the beginning teacher can learn about different teaching styles, critique and affirm their beliefs about classroom and instructional practices and consider alternative ways of teaching. The ability to observe strategies being implemented effectively for students with special educational needs
will allow beginning teachers to translate the theory and knowledge they have gained into practice.

The beginning teachers in the study highlighted the importance of feedback once they start teaching that would allow them to know if they are teaching appropriately, if they are meeting the requirements for the school and if there were things they could do better. Confidence is built when beginning teachers’ efforts are recognised and acknowledged especially during the initial stages of learning to teach when they are filled with anxiety and doubt.

Teaching students with special educational needs is a complex task and beginning teachers need the support of other teachers and school administration to provide frequent feedback about their teaching. By providing the opportunity to observe others and obtain frequent constructive feedback about their inclusion of students with special educational needs, the beginning teacher will develop confidence in their ability to cater for these students and will maintain a more positive attitude towards inclusion (Sharma, Forlin, Loreman & Earle, 2006). Mentor teachers and understanding peers may be deemed most suitable to provide this support as the beginning teacher will be more confident with someone they respect and trust.

2. Reduced Workload

Providing beginning teachers with more non-teaching time and a reduced workload in the initial period of teaching will also help to support beginning teachers to find time to reflect on their teaching. Beginning teachers need extra time to learn to teach, to plan lessons, to develop their teaching resources, to learn about their roles and
responsibilities, to consult with mentors and peers, to acquire further knowledge and skills, and to observe experienced teachers in their classrooms. Beginning teachers also need to be given sufficient independence to carry out their jobs, and the autonomy to make professional decisions, and explore additional approaches to teaching. Principals need to remember that driving beginning teachers to work harder and longer because they are deemed young and motivated can be counterproductive.

Education as a profession asks the same level of work from their new recruits as those with many years of experience which often puts added pressure on beginning teachers. With the support of successful experienced teachers to guide them and a decreased workload to allow time to learn and develop their teaching skills, beginning teachers will be more effective and confident about inclusion and maintain positive attitudes towards the students with special educational needs (Ainscow, 2004).

3. Ongoing Support and Assistance from Peers and Colleagues

Beginning teachers need someone easily accessible in their schools, preferably teaching the same grade level or content area, to help and support them on a regular basis. They should be able to discuss their experiences, provide guidance, help with problem-solving and most importantly provide the ongoing emotional support necessary for the beginning teacher (Kamens, Loprete & Slostad, 2000; Westwood & Graham, 2003). The participants indicated they felt more confident to teach students with special educational needs when they had the support of a colleague to share ideas with and discuss their concerns and challenges. The value beginning teachers placed in the colleague they could go to when they needed to debrief and reflect on...
events was evident in this study and highlighted the need to provide opportunities for this support system to develop in the initial stages of the year.

4. Help with Managing Student Behaviour

The teaching of students with special educational needs may require beginning teachers to adapt their behaviour management style or develop new approaches to the management of their classroom. This can be a stressful or challenging aspect of teaching and may cause beginning teachers to question their ability and lose confidence in their skills. Principals and colleagues could support the beginning teachers by working with them to support the development of effective classroom management strategies in order to support the successful teaching of students with special educational needs (Cook, 2002; Romi & Leyser, 2006).

5.5 Implications and Recommendations for Induction Programmes

It is crucial that teacher induction and mentoring programs effectively support beginning teachers as they make the transition from their education programs to the classroom (Ramsey, 2000). These programs also need to aim to reduce the number of beginning teachers leaving the profession and support those that struggle with the responsibilities of teaching a diverse range of students. Providing beginning teachers with numerous opportunities for support, guidance, and feedback during their first years appears to be an important aspect of their early development as professional teachers and a key to ensuring the positive attitudes required for inclusion of students with special educational needs to be successful. The challenges of teaching require ongoing professional learning opportunities; however beginning teachers often do not
have sufficient access to professional development related to teaching students with special educational needs, especially when they are placed in rural or remote locations. Placements of beginning teachers in rural and isolated areas without adequate support and education may contribute to their stress and anxiety levels and lead to negative attitudes and the possibility of failure for both the teacher and student with special educational needs. Teachers who have ample opportunities to develop and improve their skills are less likely to feel isolated and overwhelmed and see themselves as more capable of supporting student learning (Brownell & Smith, 1993). The investigation identified that beginning teachers feel insufficiently equipped to meet the needs of their students and are not given enough opportunities to learn ways to meet those needs.

1. Planning Should be Based on Teacher Concerns

The reality in schools in Western Australia is that inclusion of students with special educational needs is now more common and beginning teachers will be required to teach these students in mainstream classrooms. To effectively cater for these students, remain confident in their abilities and positive towards students with special educational needs, beginning teachers will need to be able to discuss their needs and concerns. In order to provide the best possible support during the first year of teaching, beginning teachers’ concerns and apprehensions should be well understood by principals, mentors, teacher educators, and those responsible for induction programmes. Newly graduated teachers need responsive structured support and guidance during their initial years in the profession especially when catering for an
inclusive classroom with the diversity now seen in mainstream classrooms (Booth, Nes & Stromstad, 2003). By identifying the concerns of beginning teachers, there is the opportunity to provide these teachers with the support they need to be successful, confident and positive teachers of students with special educational needs.

2. Ensure the Support is Prompt and Timely

It is imperative that newly graduated teachers are given support during the initial weeks of their professional career in order to establish a positive and supportive atmosphere and enable them to develop confidence in their skills and abilities. Beginning teachers should be able to find assistance and encouragement from a variety of sources during the early weeks of their career and even before they start teaching their first class and this support should be readily available. Some beginning teachers may also find they have a student with special educational needs in their first class and this may be the first time they have had the opportunity to teach these students. This may be quite concerning and stressful for beginning teachers and they may lose confidence in their ability to support these students effectively (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000a).

Schools can take measures to provide information about the individual students and their abilities as well as the opportunity for the beginning teacher to collaborate with previous teachers and administration before working with the student. This collaboration can help to alleviate some of these concerns and support the development of an effective teaching program for the student with special educational needs as well as the rest of the class. There should be opportunities for the mentor
teachers and peers to be available to support the beginning teacher and ease the transition of entry into teaching, and others in the whole school community must be ready and willing to intervene to provide support when appropriate, without necessarily waiting to be asked.

3. Beginning Teachers Need On-going Support

The participants of the research discussed professional concerns such as classroom management, instructional strategies, and their roles and responsibilities as some of the reasons for their lack of confidence to teach students with special educational needs. These reservations are usually given first priority in induction assistance programs and professional learning opportunities are directed towards these concerns. The personal concerns of beginning teachers including a lack of confidence, difficulties managing relationships, coping with reality shock and balancing home and school demands are also important aspects to consider especially when students with special educational needs are involved. When beginning teachers are faced with the demands of teaching inclusively and feel overwhelmed with these demands, they may become discouraged and their attitude towards these students may change.

The participants of the study also identified the need to have access to professional development courses relating to the teaching of students with special educational needs as equally important aspects of their induction. Beginning teachers will need help and support to identify and access the most useful and productive professional learning opportunities available to help them effectively teach students with special educational needs. Those responsible for the development of induction programmes...
should consider implementing an individually guided beginning teacher development model to guide the design of programmes for the professional learning of beginning teachers especially when they are working with students with special educational needs (Bishop & Jones, 2002; Campbell, Gilmore & Cuskelley, 2003). The beginning teacher is ultimately the best person to judge their own needs and initiate the direction they feel would provide the most effective learning opportunities for their context.

**5.6 Recommendations for Future Research**

This study makes a contribution to the field of teacher preparation and support for students with special educational needs, but further studies are recommended to conduct more rigorous, involved and comprehensive inquiries with beginning teachers and students, especially to examine other aspects that may contribute to the success of inclusive classrooms and present additional information about teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion.

Inclusion is considered best practice in all mainstream schools, and it is a philosophy and practice that will continue into the future. This study addresses teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and how those attitudes are reflected in their perceptions of preparedness to teach students with special educational needs in the mainstream classroom. A teacher's attitude toward inclusion has been shown to significantly influence the success of the beginning teacher and their students with special educational needs. Therefore, further research should continue to investigate aspects
that affect the inclusive classroom so that the quality of inclusive education may be improved.

The study of teacher preparation is a complex area, as many variables surround the concepts of teacher attitudes and teacher efficiency. In order to better understand the effect of teacher preparation on inclusion, it is necessary to explore teacher attitudes toward the different styles of teacher preparation programs. Research on teacher attitudes toward students with special educational needs and their preparation for inclusion can contribute to the formulation of an improved (and perhaps consistent) teacher preparation program that can better serve the needs of future teachers. Additionally, an examination of teacher attitudes toward their teacher preparation can assist in the identification of content considered relevant for inclusion. Beginning teachers need to be given the opportunity to view students with special educational needs in terms of their potential to learn, rather than retaining the traditional deficit view of students with special educational needs. Tertiary institutions need to consider a broader knowledge base regarding students with special educational needs and their potential and capabilities. From this perspective, additional research needs to be conducted to compare and contrast other types of teacher preparation programs, such as those available at other Western Australian universities, to address issues of course content and design, practical placement opportunities and pedagogical understandings.

Further research should be conducted to determine the practices that are most effective in increasing student achievement for students with special educational
needs and while this type of study is more commonplace in educational research the findings have relevance to the development of effective beginning teacher preparation courses. If beginning teachers can be provided with evidence based strategies and practices to support their teaching, they may develop confidence in their ability to cater for students with special educational needs. Research should be conducted to explore the reasons behind teachers decisions to use certain recommended strategies and not others. It would be beneficial to teacher education programs to know if teachers are not using these strategies as often because they are not as familiar with them or if there are other aspects involved. Studies of this nature carry the potential of developing the broader understanding of the complexities of teaching inclusively, and provide directions for change or strength of provision as appropriate.

5.7 Conclusion

This study was conducted to identify the perceptions of preparedness of pre-service and beginning teachers for teaching students with special educational needs. The study also provided the opportunity to hear the voices of the beginning teachers and identify their attitudes and beliefs about teaching, the areas of support they need in their initial teaching placements, and the aspects influencing their attitude towards students with special educational needs. This study has broadened and added to the research base on the perceptions and attitudes of beginning teachers and the education of students with special educational needs. The development of more inclusive and diverse classrooms and the changing views of educating all students and meeting everyone’s needs represent significant challenges to mainstream beginning
teachers. The improvement of teacher preparation programs to address these developing complexities in relation to students with special educational needs is clearly an essential component of this study. Beginning teacher’s perceptions and attitudes need to be guided carefully through their teacher education course and practical placement experiences in order to support the education of students with special educational needs effectively (Ainscow, 2004).

The preparation of pre-service and beginning teachers to effectively cater for students with special educational needs is a complex issue and although beginning teachers appear to be graduating with a positive attitude towards inclusion, this positive attitude may not be sustained if teachers do not have the necessary confidence in their abilities and skills. As there is limited support and professional learning opportunities available to beginning teachers once they become practicing teachers, there is concern that these attitudes will not remain positive for very long. The study by Hodkinson (2006), which found that teachers in their first year of teaching were less positive about inclusion than they were as beginning teachers, gives substance to this judgment. In part, this decrease was attributed to their perception that they lacked the specialised skills needed to cater for children with special educational needs. Accordingly, beginning teachers need both ‘the will and the skill’ (Jackson, Chalmers, & Wills, 2004) to effectively cater for the diversity of inclusive classrooms. The research has, however, shown that the more prepared beginning teachers were the more likely they were to find fulfilment in their career and remain in the profession.
References


Bakken, J. P. (2010). The general education classroom: This is not where students with disabilities should be placed. *Advances in Special Education, 19*, 129-139.


Appendix A Interview Guide

Phone Interview Questions:

What are the perceptions of newly qualified teachers regarding their confidence and preparedness to successfully educate students with special educational needs?

How do these perceptions of preparedness influence their attitude towards the inclusion of students with special needs?

More specifically:

a) How confident do pre-service and beginning teachers (B. Ed. and Dip. Ed new graduates) feel about teaching students with special educational needs (students who have intellectual or physical disabilities)?

b) How well prepared do pre-service and beginning teachers feel about teaching students with special educational needs?

c) What concerns (if any) do these teachers have about teaching students with special educational needs?

d) What do pre-service and beginning teachers identify as the most beneficial learning experiences in preparing them for educating students with special educational needs?

e) What aspects of their pre-service education do these teachers feel could be improved or changed to support them more effectively?

f) What other support do these teachers identify as needed in order for them to be more confident about teaching students with special educational needs?
Appendix B Letter to Participants

Project Title: Are beginning teachers in Western Australia feeling confident and ready to teach students with special needs and what has contributed to their attitudes?

My name is Tiffany Banner. I am a Masters student at Murdoch University investigating the perceptions of beginning teachers under the Supervision of Dr Susan McKenzie. The purpose of this study is to find out how confident to teach students with special needs beginning teachers in Western Australia really are and what makes them feel this way.

I want to find out:

1. How confident and prepared you feel about teaching students with special needs?
2. What has led you to feel this way?
3. What major concerns you have about teaching students with special needs?
4. How effectively you feel your training has prepared you for teaching students with special needs?
5. What have been the most beneficial experiences in preparing you for teaching students with special needs? (at uni, prac, personal experiences)
6. What aspects of your pre-service education you feel could be improved or changed to support you more effectively?
7. What other support you feel you need in order to be more confident about teaching students with special needs?

To find out this information, I would like to conduct a phone interview with about 20 people. I would be most grateful if you would consent to an interview at a time that suits you. It is anticipated that the time to complete the interview will be no more than 15 minutes. I understand that everyone is pressed for time but I would really appreciate hearing your views.

If you are available for an interview please fill in the slip below and return it in the envelope provided. Please note that there is no obligation for you to return the form and if you do agree to take part, you can withdraw your involvement at any time. Interviews will be recorded and you are free to decline to answer any particular questions. Any information provided will be in the strictest confidence and privacy will be maintained throughout the study. The interview notes and resulting research report will not include your names or information that could identify you.

If you have any questions about this project please feel free to contact either myself, Tiffany Wendt, on 9331 8382 or my supervisor, Dr Susan McKenzie, on 9360 2527. My supervisor and I are happy to discuss with you any concerns you may have on how this study has been conducted, or alternatively you can contact Murdoch University’s Human Research Ethics Committee on 9360 6677.

Yours sincerely,

Tiffany Banner

*****************************************************************************

I (the participant) have read the information above. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this activity, however, I know that I may change my mind and stop at any time. I understand that all information provided is treated as confidential and will not be released by the investigator unless required to do so by law. I agree that research data gathered for this study may be published provided my name or other information which might identify me is not used.

Name of participant:

Date:   Phone Number:   Preferred time:
Appendix C Focus Group Guide

Introduction to participants in the focus groups:

Thank you for agreeing to participate. I am very interested to hear your valuable opinion.

• The purpose of this study is to learn how the themes and data identified from interviews with pre-service teachers reflect or differ from your perceptions as beginning teachers.
• The information you give me is completely confidential, and I will not associate your name with anything you say in the focus group.
• I would like to tape the focus groups so that we can make sure to capture the thoughts, opinions, and ideas we hear from the group. No names will be attached to the focus groups and the tapes will be destroyed as soon as they are transcribed.
• You may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time.
• I understand how important it is that this information is kept private and confidential. I will ask participants to respect each other’s confidentiality.

Questions to ask the focus group:

1. How do you perceive these themes capture your experience and perceptions of teaching students with special educational needs?
2. How do these themes capture your perceptions of teaching students with special needs?
3. Describe what aspects of your experience and perceptions are not adequately reflected in the themes.
4. Are there any themes you feel do not adequately reflect the analysis of the interviews?
5. Do you have any other themes or comments you would like to add to the discussion?
Themes reflected in the interviews and discussed in the focus groups:

Theme 1: Knowledge/Skills
Participants identify their knowledge and skills as aspects influencing their attitude towards the teaching of students with special educational needs. The need for additional education and concern for lack of personal professional experience was a consistent theme expressed by teachers.
Indicators: Designated when a person talks about:
• Confidence in their skills and knowledge
• Preparation for teaching students with special educational needs
• Preparation for inclusive teaching.

Theme 2: Confidence
Participants identify their confidence or lack of confidence in their ability to teach students with special educational needs as a contributing factor affecting their attitude.
Indicators: Designated when a person talks about:
• Feeling unprepared to teach students with special educational needs
• Lacking confidence in their ability to teach effectively
• Feeling confident about their abilities.

Theme 3: Personal Background
A person identifies their personal background experience as influencing their attitude towards student with special educational needs.
Indicators: Designated when a person talks about:
• Personal experiences with students with special educational needs
• Prior knowledge working with students with special educational needs
• Family members with special educational needs
• Family members working with students with special educational needs.

Theme 4: Practical Experiences
The person identifies the practical experiences they have received through university as influencing their attitude.
Indicators: Designated when a person talks about:
• Practical university experiences with students with special educational needs
• Exposure to students with special educational needs through their practical placement experience
• Limited experience working or teaching students with special needs on practical placements
Theme 5: Reality Gap
The person identifies the gap between theory learned at university and the practical situation in the classroom as influencing their attitude.
Indicators: Designated when a person talks about:
• The reality of teaching
• The gap between what they have learnt and the practice of teaching
• Preparation for the management and administration aspects of the classroom.
• All aspects of the classroom being included.

Theme 6: Characteristics of the Student with Special Needs
The participant identifies the student characteristics as contributing aspects influencing their attitude.
Indicators: Designated when a person talks about:
• The severity of a student’s disability
• The type of disability
• Catering for different needs and abilities
• The individual needs of the child.

Theme 7: The School Context
The participant must identify the school context as an influencing factor contributing to their attitude towards students with special educational needs.
Indicators: Designated when a participant talks about:
• School resources and personnel
• Principal and Administration support
• Inclusive culture
• Attitudes of the school community

Theme 8: Time Constraints
The person identifies time constraints as influencing their attitude towards students with special educational needs.
Indicators: Designated when a person talks about:
• Limited time available to teach students with special educational needs
• Spending too much/not enough time on students with special needs
• Extra time required to plan and program for students with special needs
• Not enough time to support students.

Theme 9: On-going Support
The participant identifies the need for on-going support and education as a contributing factor affecting their attitude.
Indicators: Designated when a person talks about:
• The desire to continue their education after university
• Needing further support once they start teaching.
• Wanting to access courses and professional development opportunities.