Supporting Teachers to Work with Children with Exceptionalities

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Abstract

The current study had two purposes: to explore further revisions to the Three-Part Schedule D Additional Qualification (AQ) courses in special education and to determine if a virtual knowledge network would be a viable and welcome tool in building teacher capacity for classroom inclusion of students with exceptionalities. Educational stakeholders convened at the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) for a two-day consultation meeting. A consensus-building workshop was used on the first day to discuss further revisions to the revised AQ course guidelines and to specifically identify gaps in teacher knowledge and

skills. An open space consultation (Owen, 1997) was used on the second day to discuss the possibility of a provincial virtual knowledge network that would support revised Special Education AQ course guidelines and build capacity for teachers working with children with exceptionalities.

Keywords: Ontario, teacher education, inclusive education, special education, additional qualifications.

Précis/Résumé

La présente étude avait deux objectifs: explorer de nouvelles révisions à la qualification en trois parties Annexe D (AD) additionnelle des cours d'éducation spéciale et de déterminer si un réseau virtuel de connaissances serait un outil viable et bienvenue dans le renforcement des capacités des enseignants pour l'inclusion en classe de des élèves en difficulté. Acteurs de l'éducation réunis à l'Ordre des enseignantes et des enseignants de l'Ontario pour une réunion de consultation de deux jours. Un atelier de consensus a été utilisé dès le premier jour pour discuter d'autres révisions aux lignes directrices révisées cours AD et d'identifier précisément les lacunes dans les connaissances et les compétences des enseignants. Une consultation espace ouvert (Owen, 1997) a été utilisé sur la deuxième journée pour discuter de la possibilité d'un réseau de connaissances virtuel provincial qui appuierait révisée des directives spéciales d'enseignement de cours AD et le renforcement des capacités pour les enseignants travaillant avec des enfants ayant des besoins particuliers.

Mots-clés: l'Ontario, la formation des enseignants, l'éducation inclusive, l'éducation spéciale, les qualifications supplémentaires.

Introduction

Educators and researchers in Ontario often find themselves in a precarious position, eager to jump into the world of inclusion only to find themselves held back by the tether of an out-dated medicalized model of special education (Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2005). Although recent Ministry documents have voiced the intention of moving towards inclusive and more equitable education, the reality is we have two clearly delineated streams, general and special education. In Ontario, teachers are often constrained by legislation, terminology and board practices that do not fully embrace the shift towards a reconceptualization of schooling that supports inclusive learning environments for all children. Until legislation changes we must work within a system that has enough room for adaptations, yet few explicit requirements for accountability regarding inclusion. As such, the researchers in this study aim to support teachers in accomplishing what change they can within the current structure of their classrooms and schools.

One of the main challenges to the understanding that all children deserve and should be included in the regular education classroom may be the Additional Qualifications[1] available in special education. Maintaining this separate form of qualifications for teachers to enable them to work with children with exceptionalities[2] has unfortunately contributed to the misperception that there is some body of knowledge that the general educator does not possess and is therefore unqualified to work with children with exceptionalities. In the current structure of the Special Education AQ's the focus has

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[1] Additional Qualifications (AQ) are done post B.Ed. They are available in a wide range of teaching focus areas and division levels.
[2] The word exceptionalities is used instead of disabilities because Giftedness was part of the discussion

been on legislation, assessment, strategies and administration. The College of Teachers has developed another series of Additional Qualifications in Inclusive Education, which is geared towards a definition of inclusion that encompasses all students who may find themselves on the margins within educational contexts. There is some discussion pertaining to disability but the knowledge and skills related to specific exceptionalities are not part of this series of courses.

The most popular Additional Qualification courses in Ontario are those designed to support educators in meeting the needs of students with exceptionalities. Many of the individuals who enroll in these courses do so to build their capacity to effectively meet the needs of diverse learners within the regular education classroom (Killoran & Jordan, 2011). Others enroll in order to qualify to teach in special education withdrawal, segregated class programs or resource roles that involve working collaboratively with colleagues.

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, the College of Teachers wanted to further explore possible revisions to the Three-Part Schedule D AQ courses in special education.[3] Second, the authors wanted to identify ways of supporting practicing teachers in fostering classroom inclusion for students with exceptionalities and to determine if a virtual network would be a viable and welcome tool in doing so. Educational stakeholders convened at the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) to discuss further revisions to the revised AQ course guidelines (Killoran & Jordan, 2011), and to specifically identify gaps in teacher knowledge, skills and practices. Stakeholders also

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[3] Additional Qualifications for working with students with exceptionalities are captured under the Special Education courses. This does not preclude the courses from having an inclusive focus but there is no requirement that inclusion be a focus of these courses

discussed ways of supporting the implementation of the guidelines. The main discussion

revolved around the possibility of a provincial virtual knowledge network that would

support revised Special Education AQ course guidelines and build capacity for teachers

working with children with exceptionalities.

Building Educator Capacity to Work with Children with Exceptionalities

Within Ontario, there has been an increasing focus on inclusive education since

the latest Special Education AQ courses guidelines were released in 2003. The Ministry

has identified building capacity in areas such as differentiated instruction and assessment

as a priority (Ministry of Education, 2009a). A proliferation of Ministry created resource

documents has been released to support quality instruction for students with Individual

Education Plans (IEPs) (e.g. Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on

Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs in

Kindergarten to Grade 6 and Learning for All K-12, Growing Success). Overall, current

research and Ministry initiatives within Ontario highlight the importance of building

educator capacity to meet the needs of diverse learners within inclusive settings.

Although much of the Ministry's focus has been on the "how to", there has been a

requirement by the Ministry that all boards create a policy on equity and inclusive

education. (Ministry of Education, 2009a). Writing a policy that embraces inclusion

involves much more than knowing how to accommodate students with exceptionalities or

modify the curriculum. In order for the policy to be realized, a belief system that commits

to inclusion is necessary. This is much harder to realize than one might hope. The

researchers in this study were interested in exploring with stakeholders changes to the

Special Education Additional Qualification courses that would support more inclusive

practices for all students with exceptionalities. Investigating the potential of a virtual

knowledge network for supporting these necessary shifts in teaching philosophy and

practice was also a key objective of this policy development project.

Initiatives to Support Special Education Delivery

In 2010, the Ontario College of Teachers held a series of Open Space forums (Owen,

1997), which drew together representatives of the community who provide or implement

special education teacher education, programs and services. Subsequently a writing team

was convened to recommend changes to the content and practices inherent within the

three current guidelines for Additional Qualifications in special education. The Principal

Investigators of the current study were members of this team. Members of the OCT

writing team indicated the pressing need to address educators' misconceptions regarding

the nature of disability and their roles in supporting students with special learning needs.

In order to ensure broad participation in the planning process for revising the AQ

Guidelines, the OCT supplemented the evidence gathered in the Open Space Forums with

an online survey to receive feedback on the knowledge, skills, practices, and experiences

individuals consider to be most important for teachers completing the three-part Schedule

D AQ courses in special education. Both educator and parent respondents emphasized the

importance of teacher capacity building in the areas of supporting students with

exceptionalities and IEPs. The OCT did not provide incentives for participants to

complete the online survey, yet the college reported that this survey received the greatest

number of responses (N=3,396) of any survey previously conducted (OCT, 2011b). The

recommendations provided by the Open Space Forum and Writing Team participants and

the survey respondents demonstrated a need for a substantive resource to support the

development of knowledge, skills and practices in Ontario educators who work with

students with exceptional learning needs. The revision of the Schedule D Special

Education AQ guidelines needed to be supplemented by a dynamic resource that would

bring delivery of resources, information and evidence-based practices, not only to

candidates taking the courses and their instructors, but also to the wider community in

Ontario.

Method

Participants

Twenty-four members of the teaching profession and university faculty in

special/inclusive education participated in a two-day consultation meeting at the Ontario

College of Teachers. Seventeen of the participants were women and seven of the

participants were men. Participants were previously known to the researchers through

participation in OCT Open Space Forums and/or the writing team convened earlier by the

OCT, or through their research and writing in the area of inclusive/special education in

Ontario. A researcher from every university in Ontario was invited, along with

representatives from the French and English publicly funded boards throughout Ontario.

The majority of the participants came from the larger group who participated in the

earlier Open Space session held by the OCT. The Principal Investigators of the study and

representatives from the OCT also acted as facilitators and participants in this

consultation.

Materials and Procedure

The consultation meeting took place over two days. On the first day of the consultation, participants discussed further revisions to the revised AQ course guidelines and specifically examined gaps in teacher knowledge and skills that needed to be addressed in the guidelines. The second day of the consultation focused on how a provincial virtual knowledge network could align with revised AQ course content and help support teachers working with children with exceptionalities.

Day one: consensus-building. A consensus-building workshop structured the first day of the consultation meeting. Participants explored the question: *What do teachers need to know, do and value at the end of the Special Ed Part Three Specialist AQ course?* (OCT, 2011c). Participants were given results of the OCT online survey noted above and a draft of the revised AQ guidelines structure and content chart. They were asked to consider how the revised draft AQ guidelines could be enhanced to reflect provincial feedback from the online survey as well as their own lived experiences.

Participants began by individually considering what could be added or refined in the existing structure and content of the revised draft guidelines. Following the individual reflection, participants gathered into groups of three to five, for a total of six small groups. Group members conferred about their thoughts on further revisions. A larger replica of the chart was available for each group to record the results of their discussion. The goal at this stage was to generate additional ideas and refine ones previously mentioned, while preserving the diversity of opinions and responses being generated (OCT, 2011c). The day concluded with a large group processing session, in which small

group suggestions were grouped and refined with the goal of achieving consensus on revisions to the AQ guidelines.

Day two: open space consultation. The second day of the consultation focused on exploring the mobilization of professional knowledge through a virtual knowledge network (OCT, 2011c). An open space consultation process (Owen, 1997) was used to capitalize on the expertise and breadth of knowledge of participants at the meeting. During the open space consultation, individuals generated topics relevant to the design and content of a virtual knowledge network. Participants were in charge of the agenda for the morning, generating topics and times for discussions. Participants were informed about the law of open space: "if you are neither learning nor contributing move on" (OCT, 2011c) and the four principles of open space: 1. whenever it starts is the right time; 2. whoever comes are the right 'people'; 3. whatever happens is the only thing that could have; and 4. when it's over, it's over (OCT, 2011c).

After the topics were generated, and the times and locations for discussions were set, participants individually selected the topic he or she wanted to discuss. Following with the principles of open space, participants were in charge of their own learning and could move between discussion topics as they wished, but they were also accountable for their learning. Chart paper and markers were provided in order for participants to record their discussions. Groups came to a consensus as to when their discussion was finished. Participants then reconvened as a large group to review the content generated from small group discussions. Upon sharing all of the discussions, participants were asked to individually identify the top three priorities for a virtual knowledge network to support

AQ revisions and teachers working with students with exceptionalities. The day

concluded with a large group session to discuss final revisions to, and overall issues with,

the AQ course content and guidelines. The large group continued to cluster and refine

ideas until a consensus on the content and guidelines was achieved. Information gathered

at this session supported the development of a virtual provincial knowledge network that

would be aligned with the revised Special Education AQ guidelines.

Data Analysis

Data from the two-day consultation session were analyzed using two different

techniques. On day one, the data were analyzed during the consultation process. A

consensus building technique was used to group and refine participants' suggested AQ

revisions. Consensus building has been criticized in the literature for the potential to

ignore participant voice or enact little change in practice (see Inness, 2004). Inness

(2004) contends, however, that consensus building is a valuable tool when stakeholders

share a common interest in solving a complex dilemma. Participants in this study shared

an interest in the area of inclusive/special education as evident through their previous

participation in OCT forums and/or the earlier writing team, or through their research

activities. Ylimaki and Brunner (2011) also highlight the need to welcome conflicting

views in processes of shared decision-making. To ensure the data accurately represented

participants' views, any ideas that could not be grouped together were therefore left

preserved. To further enhance credibility of the data collection and analysis, the large

group facilitator used a "member check" strategy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314),

seeking confirmation from participants whenever someone suggested a grouping of

particular ideas. All of the groupings were determined by the workshop participants.

There were no changes made by the researchers afterwards.

In contrast to the data from the first day of the consultation, the data from the second

day were analyzed once the consultation process was completed. The researchers coded

the participant generated discussion topics related to the virtual network and came up

with three categories. Data analysis was considered to be complete once all discussion

topics had been coded and categorized and the three resulting categories met standards of

internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (see Patton, 2002, pp. 465-466). The

specific discussion topics were sorted under the three categories and are discussed in the

next section. The three categories revealed through the coding of the participant-

generated discussion topics were: current gaps in teacher knowledge, skills, and

practices; contextualizing the AQ requirements; and logistical and technological concerns

associated with developing and implementing a network to support AQ revisions and

classroom inclusion.

Findings and Discussion

Revisions to Special Education AQ Course Content and Guidelines

Prior to our project, the OCT had created a revised draft of the Special Education

AQ guidelines based on recommendations from the collected provincial consultation data

and the guidance of a writing team. The draft guideline chart specified the knowledge,

skills, and practices teachers should acquire in categories of:

i.   Overall Expectations,

ii.   Theoretical Foundations,

iii. Program Planning, Development, and Implementation,

iv. Leadership in the Instructional Settings,

v. Assessments and Evaluation, and

vi. Shared Support for Learning.

Participants in the current study considered the revised draft they were given by the OCT and explored gaps in the revised guideline related to knowledge, skills, practices and sources of information. Participants commented on needed additions to and overall issues with the AQ courses revised guidelines (see Table 1).

Table 1: *Recommended Additions*

Overall Expectations	Recommended additions include: knowledge, beliefs, and actions about exceptionalities, understanding the larger context framing special education (including federal legislation and international policies), and collaboration/facilitating collaboration. Participants also expressed the need to develop educators' practical knowledge base as it pertains to IEPs, IPRCS, exceptionalities, accommodations, and modifications.
Theoretical Foundations	Recommended additions include: the need to help others understand and work effectively with at risk and/or marginalized students (including those with mental health issues), and fostering an awareness of variations of service delivery models.
Program Planning, Development, and Implementation	Additions included developing awareness of term or semester planning and streaming, and supporting ELL learners while understanding the overlap between ELL learners and those with special education needs, supporting the needs of students who do not meet Ministry criteria for exceptionalities, understanding assistive technology, and understanding boards' Special Education Plans.
Leadership in the Instructional Settings	Participants recommended that concepts of shared ownership of student welfare, facilitating, collaborating, and communicating to effectively implement IEPs, differentiated instruction, and assessments and evaluation be added.
Assessments and Evaluation	Additions included the need to facilitate assessment as a collaborative, continuous, self-correcting, cyclical process that drives effective instruction, early prevention and ongoing intervention for students at risk. Assessment and evaluation beyond/outside identification, and critical analysis of the meaningfulness and applicability of standardized assessment data was expressed as necessary knowledge for educators.
Shared Support for Learning	Participants agreed that content should be added related to providing parents with written and verbal feedback.

In addition to needed revisions, participants also identified overall issues with the AQ course guidelines. The issues identified by participants suggest gaps in the current AQ guidelines concerning effective practices around the use of IEPs. There was consensus that explicit expectations related to IEPs needed to be integrated throughout the AQ course content. An issue was expressed related to the lack of emphasis on provincial special education requirements and mandates.

Participants also expressed concern with the language of leadership within the course guidelines. They stressed the need to emphasize mentoring, collaboration, and co-ownership of student learning within AQ course content. In connection with this, it was suggested that the heading "leadership in the instructional setting" be refined to "*shared* leadership in the instructional setting." Participants felt the change would emphasize the importance of collaboration in supporting student learning. Collaborative relationships between educational stakeholders are imperative for inclusive educational practice. In a study of inclusive practices in New York, Kilanowski-Press, Foote, and Rinaldo (2010) found that collaborative teaching between regular and special educators was underused by educators. The researchers discussed a lack of "integration of special education expertise into the regular education curriculum on a continuous basis" (Kilanowski-Press et al., 2010, p. 53). The issues identified by participants with the AQ guidelines point to the need to develop capacity in areas pertaining to educator collaboration and joint programming. Mobilizing expertise and knowledge of diverse educational stakeholders may help to foster collaboration in the design and delivery of inclusive education practice.

Finally, participants raised more specific issues within particular categories of the AQ course guidelines. Within "Overall Expectations" the issue of tokenism in regards to instructors modeling the integration of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit ways of knowing and perspectives was raised. Further exploration on how instructors could authentically integrate this content was needed. It was also suggested that the use of the word "others" throughout the guidelines was vague in regards to stakeholders such as parents, school teams, and community agencies.

Although many of the suggested additions were disability or skill specific these are not mutually exclusive to inclusive classrooms. The general education teacher also requires this knowledge if he or she is to plan appropriately for the child's inclusion. There was much discussion about leadership, collaboration and shared ownership, which are critical to successful inclusion.

The Development and Implementation of a Provincial Virtual Knowledge Network

During the second day of the consultation, participants explored the development and implementation of a provincial virtual knowledge network that would mobilize knowledge on best practices in educating children with exceptionalities (OCT, 2011c). The network would be designed to not only support revised AQ course content and delivery, but also to help develop teachers' knowledge, skills, and practices as they pertain to classroom inclusion for students with exceptionalities more broadly. In alignment with the ethic of an Open Space process (Owen, 1997) participants generated their own ideas for the purpose of the site, the content of the site, and the technological characteristics of the site. Ten topics for discussion resulted:

- Stakeholders in the virtual knowledge network;

- Resources to include on the network;

- The balance between dynamic and static content and interactive components of

  the site;

- Equity of accessibility;

- Building communities of care;

- Mental health literacy (knowledge and research);

- Gatekeepers of the site;

- Background knowledge regarding the purpose of the site and who it is designed

  for;

- Special education trends and statistics;

- Addressing ESL/ELL issues with special education learners.

As mentioned earlier these specific topics were collapsed into three categories: current

gaps in teacher knowledge, skills and practices; contextualizing the AQ requirements;

and logistical and technological concerns.

Addressing gaps in teacher knowledge, skills and resources.

During the consensus-building workshop, participants acknowledged current

gaps in teacher knowledge, skills, and practices as they pertain to working with children

with exceptionalities in the classroom. The identified gaps were: knowledge of mental

health literacy; specific knowledge of disabilities; knowledge of systemic trends and

results in special education; and a lack of a centralized repository of information. The

discussions revealed further insights into needed revisions to AQ course content and

guidelines, as well as the design of a virtual knowledge network to help address these gaps in knowledge, skills, and practices.

Mental health literacy. Participants noted the increase in mental health concerns and the need to develop teacher capacity in mental health literacy. Participant concerns align with the recently released mental health and addictions strategy "Open Minds, Healthy Minds" (Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, 2011). Although not specific to the Ontario context, researchers comment on the need for teachers to recognize signs of mental illness for early intervention (Meldrum, Venn, & Kutcher, 2009), while also pointing to teachers' feelings of inadequate preparation and support to fulfill this role (Graham, Phelps, Maddison, Fitzgerald, 2011; Roth, Leavy, & Best, 2008). Participants in this study noted the value of a knowledge network for helping teachers in Ontario navigate their role in supporting student mental health. Suggestions for the network included highlighting the pervasiveness of mental health issues through research and statistics and incorporating easily accessible resources and information on mental health for teachers to access.

Specific knowledge of disabilities. Participants also identified the need for educators to gain specific knowledge of exceptionalities, such as Learning Disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorders and commented that educators lack capacity in understanding and contextualizing behavioural exceptionalities. Participants commented that a virtual knowledge network could help assist teachers in understanding antecedents to behaviour. Focus groups suggested that the knowledge network include resources to help educators' problem solve behaviour incidents. The importance of understanding exceptionalities in order to design and implement appropriate modifications and accommodations that will support student learning was also discussed. Although specific

to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Segall and Campbell (2012) confirm the importance of knowing about effective instructional practices, noting that increased knowledge of practices resulted in greater practitioner acceptance of inclusion for students.

Learning advocacy skills to promote student independence was also noted as a gap tied to understandings of different exceptionalities**.** Participants felt it was important that the network facilitate knowledge of student advocacy, and provide teachers with practical resources to help support student advocacy in schools. Participant comments echo literature that stresses the relationship between students' advocacy skills and personal autonomy (Fieldler & Danneker, 2007), while also noting a lack of focus on student autonomy in IEP development (Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004). Including student narratives on the site was discussed as a way to help educators understand and support students in voicing their experiences. In addition, including research of persons with disabilities was also seen as a way to help teachers foster this perspective.

Participants expressed the importance of ensuring a balance between both theoretical information and practical knowledge of different exceptionalities when addressing this gap in teacher learning. Theories of multiple intelligences and connections to developing student profiles were raised as one example of this balance. Other forms of content to help with knowledge of disabilities included detailed case studies, with sample psychological assessments and strategies to support different

exceptionalities in the classroom[4]. Research supports the value of case study methodology for shifting teacher attitudes in support of classroom inclusion for students with exceptionalities (Evans, 2004; Sharma, 2010).

Centralized repository of policies and legislation. Other gaps participants found in the current Special Education AQ guidelines included effective and collaborative IEP development and implementation. A knowledge network could address this gap by including resources in the areas of IEP development and implementation that would be easily accessible to users. For example, participants suggested links to Ministry memoranda related to IEPS (e.g. PPM-140) as a needed resource. To further address gaps in IEP knowledge, participants stated the need for detailed case studies on the network to support educators in writing authentic and collaborative IEPs. Although some of the resources suggested by participants are currently available on-line, the virtual network would facilitate access to these resources in one location.

Another gap in the Special Education AQ guidelines included educator awareness and understanding of special education policies and legislation. Focus groups suggested a centralized repository of easy to access policies and legislation as a way of supporting teacher learning in this area. Although easily accessible through the current Ministry of Education website, participants raised the possibility of including Ministry documents such as *Learning for All K-12, Shared Solutions,* and *Growing Success* in a non-governmental central location, listed alphabetically.

Focus groups further suggested that this repository be designed in a way that would facilitate the sharing of resources between school boards. This would help address

[4] Not surprisingly many comments were grounded in medical model ideology as this is the framework within which most boards operate. The stakeholders' overall intent however was to provide services to students in the regular classroom as much as possible.

the lack of uniformity between school boards in special education practices, often seen as posing difficulties to delivering Special Education AQ content. Participants felt that this sharing of resources should not be limited to school boards, but should also be between educators and other professionals (i.e. occupational therapists and speech and language pathologists) to help promote greater collaboration in special education. Stella, Forlin, and Au (2007) found that increased knowledge of disability, policy, and legislation resulted in greater acceptance of inclusion but it also increased anxieties about having the appropriate supports in place in order to realize inclusion. Although participants did suggest the need for increasing awareness of policy, the focus on collaboration and sharing in the network might help to combat teacher anxieties that may arise as a result.

Examination of systemic trends and overall systemic results. Participants further acknowledged a lack of engagement with systemic trends and a critical analysis of overall systemic results in current Special Education AQ courses. Moreover, there is a need to support course providers and educators in examining these trends and results. For instance, focus groups drew attention to the issue of disproportionate representation in special education in terms of gender and ethnic/racial groups. Participants communicated that because teacher belief impacts inclusive classroom practice (see Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Ben-Yehuda, Leyser, & Last, 2010) the network would need to support a critical approach to these trends.

Discussion groups noted the importance of including literature on disproportionate representation in special education and ways in which this could be addressed through teacher practice on the knowledge network. It was also suggested that the site include statistics related to identification and placements, and ways in which these statistics could

be addressed to promote equity and excellence in education for all learners. While

participants noted that statistics could help educational stakeholders take a critical look at

inequitable special education practices, if these statistics are viewed without a critical

analysis, misconceptions of learners may continue to go unaddressed. Additionally,

participants stressed the need for the network to represent international and

interprovincial trends, as well as the need for the network to promote a critical view of

these trends amongst site users.

Contextualizing the AQ requirements

   Participants expressed the need for educators to contextualize the AQ requirements

and course content. A virtual knowledge network could potentially help educators

understand how the special education process fits within overall school and community

development. In particular, focus groups discussed how the site could support the

building of communities of care between educators and other professionals, and in

helping teachers navigate intersections between ESL/ELL learners and special education.

   Building communities of care. Participants commented on the isolation and pressures

educators can feel under the mistaken belief that they must possess all of the knowledge

on how to support learners. A virtual knowledge network could emphasize allies or

mentors in education by including links to information on the roles and responsibilities of

other professionals in supporting students. Stakeholders were adamant that the network

be interactive and that there be a way for users to reach out to each other. Research

echoes the value of mentorship and support in helping teachers cope with professional

stressors (Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2006; Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005). Participants

also commented on possibilities for the knowledge network to promote an awareness of

diversity and cultural responsiveness amongst educators. Further, it was suggested that the knowledge network developers form partnerships with organizations outside of special education that are representative of diverse community interests throughout the province. By including culturally specific information, the knowledge network can support practicing teachers in implementing more inclusive practices.

In addition to supporting cultural responsiveness, participants expressed the need for teachers to understand how socio-economic factors impact special education processes. Including resources that promote educator awareness of how aspects, such as parental involvement and school readiness, may be constrained by socio-economic or cultural factors could support teachers in this regard. It was suggested that the knowledge network link with Special Education Advisory Committees (SEACs) as a way of fostering home-school partnerships and promoting parent understanding of special education processes.

ESL/ELL and special education. Some focus group discussions centred on shared responsibilities between ESL/ELL providers and special education teachers. They discussed the limited combined resources to address these intersections and the lack of collaboration between special education and ESL/ELL teachers. Participants noted the need to share best teaching practices such as differentiated instruction and universal design for learning. Including resources that would help facilitate collaboration on the network would help to contextualize the AQ requirements. In this respect, the network may support teachers in navigating the intersections between special education and English language learners. Research indicates that teacher collaboration and ongoing professional development are helpful for building teaching capacity in working with ELL students with exceptionalities (Paneque & Barbetta, 2006). The value of ongoing

professional development points to the usefulness of a virtual network, which educators could consistently access. Consideration, however, would need to be given to whether Special Education AQ guidelines should reflect intersections with other guidelines, or whether this takes place in preservice teacher instruction.

Overall, focus group discussions revealed multiple ways in which a provincial virtual knowledge network could address gaps in Special Education AQ course guidelines, and help practicing teachers contextualize learning in AQ courses. The virtual knowledge network was viewed as a worthwhile resource to support the design and implementation of more inclusive educational practices across Ontario.

Logistical and Technological Concerns

Although the stakeholders envisioned a virtual network as a promising resource to support inclusive practice in Ontario, focus group discussions also pointed to issues that would need to be addressed in the development and implementation of such a network. In particular, discussions about stakeholders in the knowledge network, gatekeepers of the network, interactive components of the site, the need to ensure equity of accessibility to the site, and the importance of an updatable database that reflects trends and shifts in service delivery revealed various logistical and technological concerns. Logistical and technological concerns will need to be further unpacked in future research.

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Summary of Findings

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In addition to policy shift towards supporting the needs of diverse learners within an inclusive classroom are the increasing special education interventions taking place

across Ontario. Almost 300,000 students receive some intervention each school day

(Ministry of Education, 2009). At previous OCT consultation meetings (OCT, 2010),

individuals noted that educators continue to hold misconceptions about students with

learning challenges and how best to support these students in the classroom. Despite the

changing nature of special education and increased public importance placed on this

field, there continues to be a lack of resources to support teachers working with students

with exceptionalities in Ontario. Resources that do exist to support educators in

addressing these misconceptions lack a unified central system in which they can be easily

accessed (Killoran & Jordan, 2011). There are added issues when equity of access to

these resources is considered. First Nations and French Language communities in

secluded areas of Ontario can experience even greater difficulties accessing special

education learning supports (OCT, 2011b).

Findings from the first day of the consultation reveal needed additions to in the

revised AQ course content and guidelines. Participants commented on the need to include

capacity building in designing appropriate accommodation and modification.

Collaborative planning and shared leadership were also stressed as needed additions to

the revised AQ course content and guidelines. Many of the revisions to the guidelines

proposed by participants in this study aligned with the discussion of the virtual

knowledge network on the second day of the consultation. Specifically, the participant

generated discussion topics for the knowledge network overlapped with many of the

suggested additions to AQ course guidelines. For example, participants commented that

AQ courses need to emphasize how to work with marginalized students such as those

experiencing mental health issues. On the second day of the consultation, participants

discussed the need to foster mental health literacy through the virtual network. Other

overlapping themes between the two days included the need to increase knowledge about

the connection between ELL and special education, as well as to promote awareness

about policies and legislation.

        Participants in this study were united in their support for a dynamic, online

resource that would align with revised Special Education AQ course guidelines and build

capacity for teachers working with children with exceptionalities. During the consultation

process, participants commented on the gaps in teacher knowledge, skills and practices

and skills and focus group discussions revealed how a provincial knowledge network

could support the development of the necessary knowledge, skills and practices for

promoting inclusive practices. Combining resources related to mental health literacy,

modifications and accommodations for students with exceptionalities, IEP development

and implementation, and systemic trends in special education within a virtual network

would address the gaps in teacher knowledge identified by stakeholders. Moreover, the

content of a virtual knowledge network would be aligned with revised Special Education

AQ course guidelines. This would promote more consistent delivery of AQ course

content across the province, supporting the learning needs of both course providers and

educators (Jordan, Glenn, & McGhie-Richmond, 2010; Killoran & Jordan, 2011). In

addition, focus group discussions provided insight into the ability of a virtual network to

support practicing teachers in developing inclusive practices. In particular, the knowledge

network could be a valuable resource for contextualizing learning from AQ courses by

promoting collaborative relationships between educational stakeholders and assisting

educators in navigating connections between ESL/ELL and special education.

Limitations and Further Research

While this study revealed needed additions to the revised AQ course content and supported a virtual knowledge network, there are several limitations that suggest possibilities for further research.   Although the researchers sought diverse participants within education from across Ontario, most participants that attended the two-day consultation were English-speaking university faculty and board employees who were no longer in the classroom. The opinions of participants expressed in this particular study may therefore not accurately represent the opinions of practicing teachers or other educational stakeholders.

In order to achieve the first purpose of the study (to explore further revisions to the revised AQ guidelines) it was necessary to consolidate individual and small group ideas. In this consensus-building process, it is difficult to ensure all diverse voices were fully represented. Moreover, there is a paradox with the process of consensus building in so far as the goal is to gather diverse voices together to make a decision that may end up excluding some of these voices in the end (Hillier, 2003). To combat this paradox, the group facilitator did seek the opinions of participants whose ideas were being consolidated. Further research, however, might explore the experience of participants in the study. Finally, although participant suggestions for AQ revisions and the virtual knowledge network were supported by research literature, it remains to be seen whether the suggested revisions and knowledge network will help teachers implement changes in their classrooms and schools in order to meet the needs of all students. Further research that investigates the effectiveness of the revised AQ guidelines and the virtual network, once developed, is therefore warranted.

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