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Inclusion and behavioural difficulties in secondary schools: Representations and practices

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Marie-Pierre Fortier
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Abstract

Despite a political commitment towards inclusive education, research evidence suggests that barriers to inclusion in New Zealand remain. Notably, disciplinary practices exclude students from secondary schools. There is also little evidence as to how teachers define and practice inclusion, in spite of the fact that the translation of inclusion into practice necessitates the development of an articulated and shared vision of what inclusion entails for practice. Thus, this study aims to explore social representations of inclusion among secondary school teachers. It also aims to explore how these representations function in the classroom by examining their relationships with the practices used by teachers to prevent and manage difficult behaviour.

The study was designed as an iterative two-phase research process. Phase One involved an online questionnaire intended for teachers, teacher aides, Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour and Ministry of Education: Special education staff to explore their representations of inclusion and behavioural difficulties. Building on this preliminary investigation, Phase Two involved case studies conducted with teachers in three schools where multiple sources of information and data collection methods allowed investigation of teachers’ representations and practices in context.

Findings indicate that inclusion is multi-dimensional in teachers’ representations with elements pertaining to practices, values, social justice, and resourcing. This reveals that teachers are knowledgeable about inclusion as a professional group. Each school context and teachers’ representations of their school community influenced their representations of inclusion. However, results also show that teachers’ representations are anchored in the model of integration as participants name conditions to inclusion, among which is the condition that students’ behavioural needs are not too severe for their presence in regular classrooms. Barriers to inclusion are also identified within teachers’ representations. Teachers’ practices in preventing and dealing with difficult behaviour show a progression with preventative strategies used first and targeted practices used as behaviour seriousness increased. The variety of explanations used by participants to justify their practices point to the importance of understanding the complex relationships between representations and practices to evaluate the inclusiveness of teachers’ actions. Recommendations are made to help individual teachers and school communities building on their existing knowledge for greater inclusion.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. 1  
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................................. iii  
Table of Contents .................................................................................................................................. v  
List of Tables .......................................................................................................................................... ix  
List of Figures ........................................................................................................................................ x  
Chapter One: Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1  
  1.1 Research Aims of the Study .................................................................................................................. 2  
  1.2 Rationale for the Study .......................................................................................................................... 2  
  1.3 Context of the Study ........................................................................................................................... 3  
  1.4 The Place of the Researcher ................................................................................................................. 6  
  1.5 Thesis Overview .................................................................................................................................... 7  
Chapter Two: Literature Review ................................................................................................................. 9  
  2.1 Origins of Inclusion and Evolution of Inclusive Education ................................................................... 9  
  2.2 Conceptual Diversity of Inclusion ....................................................................................................... 17  
  2.3 Inclusion and Behavioural Difficulties at School ............................................................................. 25  
  2.4 Barriers to Inclusion and Behavioural Difficulties ......................................................................... 34  
  2.5 Prevention and Management of Difficult Behaviour for Increased Inclusion ................................ 41  
  2.6 Chapter Summary and Research Questions ...................................................................................... 48  
Chapter Three: The Theory of Social Representations ............................................................................. 51  
  3.1 Introduction to the Theory of Social Representations ................................................................. 51  
  3.2 Defining Features of Social Representations ...................................................................................... 56  
  3.3 Social Representations and Practices ............................................................................................... 64  
  3.4 Social Representations in the Professional Field of Education ..................................................... 67  
  3.5 Social Representations and Inclusion: Theoretical Criteria ......................................................... 69  
  3.6 Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................................. 70  
Chapter Four: Methodology ....................................................................................................................... 71  
  4.1 Methodological Approaches to Social Representations .................................................................. 71  
  4.2 Qualitative Research .......................................................................................................................... 73
9.2 Contribution to Knowledge ................................................................. 283
9.3 Recommendations ............................................................................. 284
9.4 Limitations ........................................................................................ 285
9.5 Future Research ............................................................................... 285
9.6 Final Words ....................................................................................... 286

References ................................................................................................. 289

Appendices ............................................................................................... 313
Appendix A: Online questionnaire (Phase One) ........................................ 315
Appendix B: Request letter to school principals (Phase One) .................... 337
Appendix C: Information sheet (Phase One) ............................................. 339
Appendix D: Follow-up letters for participants in Phase Two .................... 343
Appendix E: Request letter to school principals and boards of trustees (Phase Two) ................................................................. 346
Appendix F: Confidentiality agreement for the liaison person (Phase Two) ................................................................. 351
Appendix G: Initial invitation to participate for school staff (Phase Two) ........ 352
Appendix H: Information sheet and consent form for adult participants (Phase Two) ................................................................. 353
Appendix I: Procedure to identify and approach potential student participants (Phase Two) ................................................................. 358
Appendix J: Request letter to the school principal, chair of the board of trustees and director of the external unit (Phase Two) ................................. 361
Appendix K: Information sheet and consent form for student participants (Phase Two) ................................................................. 367
Appendix L: Interview schedules for adult participants (Phase Two) ............ 371
Appendix M: Interview schedule for student participants (Phase Two) ........ 377
Appendix N: Transcriber confidentiality agreement (Phase Two) ................. 380
Appendix O: Authority for the release of the transcripts (Phase Two) ........... 381
Appendix P: Observation sheet (Phase Two) ............................................. 382
Appendix Q: Self-report form of behaviour incidents (Phase Two) .......... 383
Appendix R: Field notes data gathering sheet (Phase Two) ....................... 384
Appendix S: Table A-1 ........................................................................... 385
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Theoretical models and approaches to behavioural difficulties</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Macfarlane and Prochnow’s continuum of problem behaviour</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Research overview</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Sampling procedure for the selection of the initial sample of schools</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Schools characteristics: comparison between population, initial sample and final sample</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Type one thematic analysis procedure</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Type two thematic analysis procedure</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Demographic characteristics of the case study schools</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Strengths and limitations of classroom observation and self-report forms</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>Phase Two: overview of the types of data</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Frequencies of responses to participant demographic information per professional group</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Frequencies of the highest reported qualification in education per professional group</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Frequencies of responses about having received formal training in inclusive and/or special education per professional group</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Ranked themes from the free word association task</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Number of coding references from participants’ definition of inclusion for each category per professional group</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Percentage (%) of responses reflecting the inclusiveness of the characteristics of inclusion per group</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>Number (n) and percentage (%) of participants’ perceived level of knowledge about inclusion per professional group</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>Percentage (%) of the level of confidence in including students perceived or identified as experiencing behavioural difficulties reported by participants per professional group</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>Number (n) of selections for each training provider per professional group</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>Number (n) and percentage (%) of selections and rank for each source of information about inclusive education per professional group</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>Mean and standard deviation (SD) for situations where discussions about inclusion occurred or were witnessed per professional group</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>Number (n) and percentage (%) of participants selecting each type of behaviour</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>Frequencies of participants’ selection of the categories of people consulted first for help to meet the needs of a SEN student, per professional group</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.14 Percentage (%) of the levels of agreement of participants for each attitudinal statement per professional group.......................... 149
Table 5.15 Number of coding references for each category of causes of difficult behaviour per professional group.................................................. 154
Table 5.16 Frequencies of the categories of issues reported as important by participants per professional group.................................................... 156
Table 6.1 Demographic information about Case Study A participants.................. 160
Table 6.2 Primary sources of information for Case Study A.......................... 161
Table 6.3 Secondary sources of information for Case Study A....................... 161
Table 6.4 Demographic information about Case Study B participants............. 168
Table 6.5 Primary sources of information for Case Study B.......................... 169
Table 6.6 Secondary sources of information involving other staff for Case Study B.......................................................................................... 169
Table 6.7 Secondary sources of information for Case Study B....................... 170
Table 6.8 Demographic information about Case Study C participants............. 178
Table 6.9 Primary sources of information for Case Study C.......................... 178
Table 6.10 Secondary sources of information for Case Study C..................... 179
Table 7.1 Associative network task: number of coding references for each theme and teachers referring to each theme per case study school.......... 189
Table 7.2 Interviews analysis: number of coding references for each theme and teachers referring to each theme in the category inclusive practices per case study school........................................ 193
Table 7.3 Interviews analysis: number of coding references for each theme and teachers referring to each theme in the category resourcing per case study school................................................................ 202
Table 7.4 Interviews analysis: number of coding references for each theme and teachers referring to each theme in the category inclusive values per case study school.................................................................. 212
Table 7.5 Interviews analysis: number of coding references for each theme and teachers referring to each theme in the category social justice per case study school..................................................................... 221
Table 7.6 Nature of participants’ attitudes towards inclusion........................ 227
Table 7.7 Number of coding references for observed practices and teachers referring to each practice per case study school.......................... 234
Table 8.1 Number of coding references for the categories of representations of inclusion among teacher participants per data collection method.... 255
List of Figures

Figure 1.1 The New Zealand model for support......................................................... 4
Figure 4.1 Case study design...................................................................................... 94
Figure 5.1 Distribution of the ratings attributed by participants of the inclusiveness of the school(s) they worked in at the time of data collection per group................................................................. 124
Figure 5.2 Selections of other groups or one’s own group as a training provider in inclusive education and/or special education................................. 129
Figure 5.3 Distribution of the number of sources of information about inclusion selected by individual participants per group........................................... 130
Figure 5.4 Relationships between groups in selecting other groups or one’s own group as a source of information about inclusive education................. 133
Figure 5.5 Percentage of the level of safety as perceived by participants in three situations........................................................................................................ 141
Figure 5.6 Percentage of the selections for the support providers as identified by teachers for dealing with behavioural difficulties................................. 144
Figure 5.7 Number of selections for school-wide practices, procedures or programmes in place in the school(s) where participants worked at the time of data collection............................................................... 145
Figure 5.8 Distribution of the attitudinal scores per group........................................ 147
Figure 5.9 Preferences in term of support for extra help to meet the needs of a SEN student per professional group............................................................... 152