

Culturally Accessible E-Learning Materials for International Special Educators

Vanessa Silla, EdD  
University of Scranton

Tim Hobbs, PhD  
Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Troy University

*Presentation at The 15th International Conference on Learning  
June 6, 2008  
Chicago, Illinois*

## Abstract

Children with disabilities in many countries are engaged in a historic move from exclusion to inclusion in schools and communities. In North America, Europe and other advantaged regions, this is supported by cultural consensus, legal mandate and enriched resources; and teachers routinely receive advanced training to support inclusive outcomes. This is not typical in other, less advantaged, regions where teachers struggle to educate all students, including those with disabilities. They achieve much on behalf of their students despite serious cultural and technical challenges. They often do so without specialized training common in more advantaged settings. For these teachers, e-learning offers an opportunity to acquire critical information and skills that are otherwise unavailable. The purpose of this presentation is to report on research in progress regarding: a) Identifying common cultural and technical challenges to e-learning experienced by educators in less advantaged regions and countries; b) Identifying information critical to e-support for international teachers engaged in educating and including children with disabilities and c) Incorporating this information into prototype, e-learning modules that minimize challenges and maximize access to information for teachers of children with disabilities in regions where comparable training is limited.

## Educational Exclusion

Special and inclusive education is well established in many countries. Efforts by teachers to develop inclusive schools are well documented. Children with disabilities in many countries receive free and appropriate schooling, are educated with non-disabled peers and are taught by highly trained teachers with best-practice professional preparation. Unfortunately, in some national settings children with disabilities are excluded and under-educated. Teachers struggle to include students with disabilities, and children with disabilities face severe educational and social barriers. Exclusion is most prevalent where economic challenges are common, special and inclusive education is not mandated, and access to current, best-practice, teacher preparation is limited. Educational exclusion often involves girls, young women and children from marginalized racial, religious and language groups; as well as children with disabilities. Teacher training for inclusive education has great potential for improving the lives of these children and others who are marginalized and excluded.

## Project Goals

The long term plans for the project included the preparation of a state-of-the-art, online course in a manner that minimizes technical barriers and accommodates commonly occurring cultural challenges. Following the development of the course, the course would be offered in a manner that respects and affirms the professionalism of teachers in diverse national and cultural settings; and supports their commitment to educating and including all children.

In an effort to achieve the long term plans identified, project goals were defined. The three project goals included the following:

- ❑ To identify and prioritize information needs of teachers in national and cultural settings where teacher preparation in special and inclusive education is limited and/or not mandated.
- ❑ To Identify common technical and cultural challenges to accessing online instruction for teachers in these settings.
- ❑ To prepare and deliver a web-based prototype course regarding special and inclusive education for teachers in locations where access to this information is otherwise limited.

### Phase I

During phase I of the project, educators and others from diverse national, cultural or regional settings were invited to identify and prioritize course content as well as review and assess proposed teaching material for quality and relevance. Teachers familiar with special and inclusive education in challenging national settings were invited review, assess and propose content for an online course for trans-national teachers of children with disabilities. Reviewers were invited to read and comment on chapters from a new, introductory, text-book for teachers of children with disabilities. Following review of the materials, the reviewers were asked to complete an online survey about the chapters they read and the supporting e-learning material (short films and web-sites) linked to related topics.

Chapter contents from Rosenberg, Westling, and McLeskey (2008) were task analyzed and presented as an online survey. Questions were presented online to guide reviews. Opportunities for general comments and recommendations were presented. Rosenberg, Westling, & McLeskey(2008) was selected based currency, breadth, style,

presentation and on-line support. The text is a recent text with an emphasis on research and best-practice information. It is a broad introduction to special and inclusive education. The content is accessible by second-language educators. Multi-cultural presentation; photos, examples and other content are consistent with the diverse makeup of potential reviewers. The text is supported by considerable e-materials that broaden and enhance the outcome of review. Finally, inclusive practices and outcomes are emphasized.

### Reviewer Feedback and Recommendations

Reviewers indicated that textbooks should place more focus on general classroom teachers. It is naïve to assume that special (or specifically trained) teachers are available in every school or town. Equally important was the focus on “full inclusion”. Reviewers noted that textbooks should put more emphasis on “full” inclusion. This is a practical and ethical issue. Inclusive instruction may be the only option in many locations where “special” classes are not available. It was recommended that case studies and practical examples from diverse international settings be included in texts. Reviewers noted that there are many excellent examples available from teachers in Mexico and other locations. These should be routinely solicited, presented and promoted.

Reviewers made several recommendations regarding definitions and terms. They recommended that texts add multiple definitions and terms for disabilities as these vary substantially between national settings. For example: in China the term “disability” is most often applied to physical disabilities. A Chinese language web-search for “learning disability” has few results. Many results, and recent Chinese research, are available for the term “difficulty” (rather than disability).

Non-disabled populations traditionally denied access to education was another theme among the reviewers. They indicated that texts should add information about such non-disabled populations denied access to education, such as girls, young women and gypsy children, for example.

- ❑ Their historic exclusion is a significant transnational issue of justice and equity.
- ❑ Present relevant examples, and case studies
- ❑ Give links to international advocacy organizations.
- ❑ Reduce information regarding multicultural issues and minority issues in North America. This content is interesting but not relevant for teachers in many countries.
- ❑ Add information regarding teaching children from multiple language groups, displaced by civil conflict, or segregated by longstanding class or gender divisions.
- ❑ Include examples of successful and unsuccessful teacher attempts regarding inclusive and multicultural education.
- ❑ Present “inclusive education” as a transnational issue with specific national antecedents and outcomes. For example some ethnic communities in China have thrived educationally for hundreds of years within a Chinese national context and others have not.

#### Some Things We Have Learned

- ❑ “Inclusion” is a social and cultural construct, a human right and a civil right.
- ❑ Teachers care passionately about their students and will exert great effort on their behalf.

- If you want to know what information teachers need; ask them; and they will tell you.

### Next Steps

Additional reviews are in progress and more are being solicited. Information from reviews will be summarized as an article and used to prepare a prototyped web-based course in special education. Phase two activities include offering a prototype course to a group of transnational teachers and graduate students in diverse settings. The course participants will be invited to provide an assessment of course content, methods, and outcomes. Phase three activities involve the incorporation of outcomes from phase one and two into a state-of-the-art online course regarding special and inclusive education to be offered on a regular basis for teachers in multiple countries and regions.

### Project Funding

The Inclusion Project is a voluntary effort by university faculty committed to preparing teachers for an inclusive future and by a grant from the Edward R. Leahy, Jr. Endowment Faculty Research Program. Information regarding this program can be viewed at

<http://www.scranton.edu/leahyendowment>