

## **A New-Institutional Analysis of Inclusion Policy Enactment in Teacher Education: A Case from Ontario**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative single case study aimed to examine the logics of one teacher education program towards preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive teaching from the perspectives of the program's coordinators. In particular, the study aimed to understand the practices of these coordinators and how these practices are influenced by inclusive education and teacher education policies. This examination would reveal how education policies are enacted in this particular case. New-Institutionalism (NI) theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) constituted the theoretical framework that guided the methodology as well as the analysis of the findings. The study revealed that the coordinators' understanding and practices around the existing inclusion and teacher education policies emerge from their own experiences in this particular program, intermingled with their beliefs about how inclusion should be enacted in teacher education and schools. Key findings included coordinators developing inclusive mindsets among pre-service teachers, negotiating their logics towards inclusion through modeling inclusive teaching practices in the university classroom, and engaging them in critical discussions around inclusion policy practice in schools, and coordinators calling for a curriculum policy change. Recommendations for future teacher education programming in response to the evolving inclusive education are offered.

*Keywords:* inclusive education policy, New-Institutionalism, teacher education, coordinators, practice, pre-service teachers

### **Introduction**

Inclusion and its challenges continue to be central to education policy research that seeks to promote access for all learners (Forlin, 2010). According to the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE), inclusive education is built on the principles of accepting, including, and respecting all students regardless of their various social, cultural, religious backgrounds, abilities, and life situations (CODE, 2014). Going beyond the limitations of the inclusion concept of 'ableism', inclusive education in this paper is used more broadly to encompass learners of diverse social, cultural, and learning needs.

Realizing the growth of student diversity and the call for adopting more equity practices in Ontario schools is reflected in the release of many inclusion-related policy documents issued by the Ontario Ministry of Education (See OME, 2009, 2014, 2014a, 2017). Therefore, understanding the position of teacher education programs in preparing future teachers for inclusive teaching practices is critical for supporting a growing and diverse student population in Ontario classrooms. According to Forlin (2010), a review of teacher education programs concerning inclusion is a significant priority to warrant that future teachers are ready to respond to the needs of diverse learners in the classroom. This priority could be evidenced by the fact that teacher preparation has been a central key component in education policy reform. Bransford et al. (2005) noted that future teachers need new and innovative ways of preparation, which allow them not to simply cover a given classroom curriculum but rather to enable multimodal learning for students of diverse learning needs.

This study aimed to examine how the coordinators of one Ontario teacher education program conceptualized inclusive education and integrated inclusion policy principles into their institutional practices to support pre-service teachers' preparation for inclusive teaching. Through the lens of the New-Institutionalism theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991), the study explored the *institutional logics* (Friedland & Alford, 1991) of the teacher education program towards inclusion from the perspectives of the program's coordinators and how these logics influenced the practices of the latter. Bridwell-Mitchell and Sherer (2017) believe that the term 'logics' in institutional policy analysis refers to "specific beliefs, values, norms, and practices" (p. 225) that pertain to a particular issue or phenomenon inside institutions, the inclusive education approach in this single case study. Thornton and Ocasio (1999) view the logics of institutions as "socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules" (p. 804) that are derived from larger societal institutions such as religions, families, and cultures. Further, NI theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) attends to how institutions and their social and cultural contexts influence the practices of the individuals involved.

## Research Context

In Ontario, where this study was conducted, advancing inclusive education and the development of more equitable education systems are major components of the education reform adopted in the province to combat discrimination and racism in education. This advancement is reflected in the policy document titled *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (OME, 2014) that is referred to in this study as the EIE (OME, 2014) document. The EIE was issued with the aim to enhance the learning experience of all learners, not only those who are identified with exceptionalities in Ontario's inclusive classrooms, and to provide a framework for Ontario school boards to develop their own context-specific inclusive education policy. Further, the EIE (OME, 2014) represents an extension of the policy document titled *Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario* (OME, 2014a) that aims to fulfill three major purposes (a) closing the gaps in students' academic achievement, (b) advancing students' learning in an inclusive environment, and (c) promoting confidence among school community members, particularly parents, towards public education (OME, 2014).

Another response to the growing diversity in Ontario classrooms was offered by the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT). Effective September 2015, the OCT extended Ontario's teacher education program from 2 to 4 terms, stressing, alongside other factors, the necessity to advance future teachers' knowledge and skills about inclusive education and its associated practices (OCT, 2013). The new program is now called the *Enhanced Teacher Education Program* (ETEP) (OCT, 2013). It is worth noting that no studies in Ontario have yet examined the impact of the extended duration of the program on the inclusive education knowledge and skills of pre-service teachers.

Keeping in mind that newly graduated teachers in Canada continue to experience instructional challenges in the inclusive classroom (Crocker & Dibbon, 2008; Loreman, 2010; McCrimmon, 2015; Rioux, 2007; Sharma et al., 2008), it was urgent to examine how one Ontario teacher education program incorporates the inclusion principles of the EIE into its programmatic curricula by attending to the perspectives of the program's coordinators. This examination aimed to reveal the challenges and opportunities for promoting inclusive teaching practices among Ontario future teachers. By exploring the perspectives and the practices of the program coordinators around inclusion and its related policies in schools and in teacher education, the study intended to answer the following questions:

1. What are the logics of the teacher education program towards inclusive education from the perspectives of program coordinators?
2. How do program coordinators adopt the principles of inclusion that are embedded in the EIE and teacher education policies and translate them into their practices?
3. How would the program's existing organizational challenges (if any) inform the administration of future teacher education programming in relation to inclusive education?

## Literature Review

The literature explored Canadian and international research conducted in the areas of inclusive education policy and practice in schools, teacher education for inclusion, and program development in teacher education. An extensive review of the above-mentioned literature showed that studies of teacher education

for inclusive education have mainly focused on teacher candidates' skills required for the inclusive classroom (Forlin, 2010; McCray & McHatton, 2011; Rose & Garner, 2010; Wang & Fitch, 2010). Other studies have focused on their attitudes and beliefs (Loreman, 2010; Shade & Stewart, 2001; Sharma, 2010; Sharma et al., 2008; Specht et al., 2016; Sharma & Sokal, 2015) towards inclusive education particularly in relation to students identified with exceptionalities (Loreman, 2010, Specht et al., 2016). However, given the enhanced program is relatively new and that no studies in Ontario have yet addressed the perspectives of program coordinators towards the preparation of pre-service teachers for inclusive teaching practices, this study is significant.

From an international perspective, the call to further engage in research on teacher preparation programs concerning inclusive education policy and practice was evident in multiple studies (See Ainscow, 2007; Rosenberg & Walther-Thomas, 2014; Specht et al., 2016; Spooner et al., 2010). Moreover, the review of the literature indicated that limited funding for teacher education programs is viewed as one of the influential factors that render the inclusive teaching practice in schools a challenging task to perform (Miles & Ahuja, 2007; Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, 2013; Slee, 2010).

### *Policies of Teacher Education and Inclusive Education in Ontario*

Inclusive education is the approach that helps school personnel, particularly teachers, to “understand, identify, address, and eliminate the biases, barriers, and power dynamics that limit students’ prospects for learning, growing, and fully contributing to society” (OME, 2014, p. 6). It is worth noting that the development of the EIE (OME, 2014) document is a practical reflection on previous international studies conducted in the areas of inclusive education and education policy research (Ainscow, 2012; Ainscow et al., 2006; Mittler, 2000). Three years later, in 2017, and after conducting the interviews with the participants of this current study, the OME released a new version of the inclusion policy titled *Ontario’s Education Equity Action Plan*. The new plan focused on four areas, including 1) school and classroom practices, 2) leadership, governance, and human resource practices, 3) data collection, integration and reporting, and 4) organizational culture change (OME, 2017, p. 13). According to the OME, the objectives of the 2017 version aim to “identify and eliminate embedded systemic barriers and discriminatory institutional and instructional practices that negatively impact the achievement and well-being of students and lead to inequitable outcomes” (OME, 2017, p. 10). Concerning school and classroom practices, the plan emphasizes that “students must also experience teaching and learning that is reflective of their needs and of who they are” (OME, 2017, p. 16), and that classrooms need to enable promising learning conditions for all students, hence the significant role of teacher education preparation programs.

Teacher education plays a crucial role in developing teachers’ knowledge and capacity to practice inclusion in today’s classrooms. The OCT policy document entitled *The Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession* (OCT, n.d.) is seen as a tool that guides certified teachers’ practices in the field. This document reflects the inclusive education approach as it emphasizes inclusion-based aspects that certified and practicing teachers in Ontario are expected to uphold. Some of these aspects are:

1. *Care*: The ethical standard of Care includes compassion, acceptance, interest, and insight for developing students’ potential. Members express their commitment to students’ wellbeing and learning through positive influence, professional judgment, and empathy in practice.
2. *Commitment to Students and Student Learning*: Members are dedicated in their care and commitment to students. They treat students equitably and with respect and are sensitive to factors that influence individual student learning. Members facilitate the development of students as contributing citizens of Canadian society. (OCT, n.d., p. 1)

Given the inclusivity challenges that exist in today’s schools, such as the overwhelming workloads that in-service teachers continue to report as well as the lack of technology resources to support students with special education needs, understanding how teacher education programs develop teachers who can cope with students’ diverse needs is significant (Bransford et al., 2005). Rioux (2007) noted that the progress of inclusive education in Canada is evident as it continues to advance and promote an equitable education for all learners. In her view, such growth requires new teaching standards to be in place to better support future teachers (Rioux, 2007). New standards may pertain to exposing future teachers to classroom contexts that represent Ontario students’ diversity. Relatedly, Goodnough et al. (2016) found that the continuous change in the Canadian K-12 settings including students’ demographics influenced the structure of teacher education programs and the pedagogies adopted.

In a study about inclusive teaching practices with pre-service teachers in Alberta Canada, Loreman (2010) noted that these future teachers had concerns about successfully practicing in the inclusive classroom and accommodating students' diverse learning needs. Therefore, offering them practical experience in diverse classroom contexts according to Rusznyak and Walton (2017), is crucial for developing their culturally-responsive and context-informed pedagogical practices. Arguably, education reform towards inclusion remains a complex and contested process. It is not based on teacher education alone but also requires significant support through policy initiatives (Operti & Brady, 2011).

### *Teacher Education Curricula and Inclusion in Schools: Issues and Challenges*

Lyons et al. (2016) found that the successful practice of inclusion in schools is a collective agency in which teachers support each other, parents are positively involved in their children's learning, and most importantly, that the school's overall environment offers students a sense of belonging. Therefore, one of the venues that would support inclusive teaching in schools is to understand how teacher education programs prepare pre-service teachers to establish positive relationships with other teachers and parents of diverse learners and what institutional challenges this preparation may entail. An earlier study by Rouse (2010) found that although many policies on inclusive education do exist, "achieving inclusion is a daunting task and dealing with differences and diversity continues to be one of the biggest problems faced by schools today" (p. 48).

To overcome some of the challenges of inclusion in schools, Bransford et al. (2005) suggest four areas of knowledge and skills pre-service teachers must be prepared for. These are, "the development of pedagogical content knowledge of the subject areas to be taught; knowledge of how to teach diverse learners; knowledge of assessment; and an understanding of how to manage classroom activities" (p. 36). In the same vein, Specht et al. (2016) maintain that there is more to do in teacher education programs to equip teacher candidates with the necessary skills required for inclusive teaching. One of the actions to do was stated by Goodnough et al. (2016), who said that teacher education program's personnel, namely the program coordinators, according to this study, need to visualize the content and pedagogy of teacher education from a more practical point of view. Integrating the principles of inclusion in teacher education curricula can ultimately establish an entry and satisfactory level of novice teachers for the inclusive classroom (Booth, 2011). Such integration would bridge the gap between theory and practice and reinforce action research about children's learning and their diverse needs (Rouse, 2010).

### **Theoretical Framework**

New-Institutionalism theory (NI) emphasizes how individuals in organizations, such as the program coordinators in this study, create meanings under institutional settings "through language and other symbolic representations" (Meyer & Rowan, 2006, p. 6). Therefore, NI is a significant lens to understand, how in light of the existing inclusion policies in schools and those of teacher education, the coordinators of one teacher education program conceptualize inclusion and its practices to support pre-service teacher preparation for the inclusive classroom.

### *New versus Old Institutionalism*

NI theory, rooted in organizational studies, examines how beliefs, norms, rules, and interests of institutions towards social phenomena such as teacher education for inclusion shape the meanings and the practices of the actors involved, and how actors' practices contribute to persistence or change of these institutions (Meyer & Rowan 1977; Scott, 1995). Scott (2014) believes that the practices of institutional actors result from (a) shared definitions of particular local situations and actions and (b) the actors' own meaning-making of policies and their prior experiences. For the purpose of this current study, these actors are referred to the program coordinators of the examined program. Relatedly, Powell (2007) claimed that "the core idea that organizations are deeply embedded in social and political environments" (p. 1), suggests that the actors' policy practices are either reflections or responses to certain beliefs, norms, and rules that exist in society at large.

Old institutionalism theory (OI) focused on the organizational structures of institutions rather than on the actors within the institutions. In OI, these actors were not regarded as agents of change (Scott & Meyer, 1994). Indeed, the Old institutionalism theory (Abrutyn & Turner, 2011; Selznick, 1957, 1996)

examined issues of impact, opposing values, and power (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). With the development of NI, the focus of institutional policy analysis shifted to the meaning-making practices of actors inside institutions who are now seen as agents of change, hence NI emphasizes the concepts of legitimacy, actors' agency, meaning-making systems, and regulation processes (Powell, 2007).

### *The Relation between Institutional policies and Policy Actors' Practices*

From a sociological standpoint, Sehring (2009) noted that NI aims to investigate how institutional policies and principles impact the anticipations, views, and orientations of actors inside institutions to better conceptualize their practices. Thus, addressing the perspectives of the coordinators in relation to inclusive education and teacher education policies is vital in this study. In the same vein, Powell and Colyvas (2008) noted that the "institutional forces shape individuals' interests and desires' and frame 'the possibilities for action and influencing'" (p. 277). While institutional policies portray certain rules, norms, and beliefs that pertain to inclusive education and teacher education, for the purposes of this study it is undoubtedly significant to indicate that there are complex interactions that exist between how these policies read and how policy actors conceptualize and translate these policies into their contextualized practices (Ball, 2015). Consequently, looking through the lens of NI, the practices of the program coordinators would result from a complex triangular interaction between 1) the coordinators' social, cultural, and professional experiences in relation to inclusive education in teacher education, 2) the existing institutional policies of inclusive education in schools, and 3) the policies of the teacher education program. Understanding this interaction would illuminate the challenges and the possibilities for action associated with pre-service teacher preparation for inclusion in this particular program.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative single case study explored how inclusion principles that are embedded in the EIE (OME, 2014) document and in teacher education policies are interpreted and translated into the institutional practices of all coordinators involved in one Ontario teacher education program. By extension, this examination sought to understand the institutional logics of the program towards inclusive education by exploring the perspectives of the program coordinators. As the study focused on one program in one particular context, choosing a holistic single case study design (Yin, 2014) was relevant. For Yin (2014), a single case "can represent a significant contribution to knowledge and theory building by confirming, challenging, or extending the theory" proposed in the study (p. 51). Based on Yin's (2014) classification, the case being explored is viewed as a common case as there are no sophisticated differences between this particular program and other programs of teacher education in Ontario. In a common case, Yin (2014) describes, "the objective is to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation-again because of the lessons it might provide about the social processes related to some theoretical interest" (p. 52). This theoretical interest is exemplified in this study by the influence of inclusion and teacher education policies on the interpretations and practices of the program coordinators of one teacher education program.

Baxter and Jack (2008) found that the researcher needs to identify 'the case' that he or she is exploring while considering the research questions. Miles and Huberman (1994) defined the case as "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context. The case is, in effect, your unit of analysis" (p. 25). Based on this study's research questions, the unit of analysis is one Ontario teacher education program and how it prepares its pre-service teachers for inclusive education. Using NI theory, this analysis sheds light on the interplay between the coordinators' understanding of inclusion in teacher preparation programs, and the ways inclusion is indeed portrayed within inclusion and teacher education-related policies.

### **Methods**

Data sources for this study consisted of the policy document titled *Equity and inclusive education in Ontario schools: Guidelines for policy development and implementation: realizing the promise of diversity* (OME, 2014), referred to in this study as the EIE document, and *the standards of practice and the ethical standards for the teaching profession* (OCT, n.d.). In addition, data sources included one semi-structured, open-ended interview conducted with each of the four coordinators who participated in

this study form one Ontario teacher education program. Some of the interview questions were as follows:

1. *How do you understand your institutional role in the program regarding developing teachers' knowledge about inclusion and their capacity to practice it in schools?*
2. *In what ways, from a policy perspective, you think the teacher education program in this faculty contributes to pre-service teacher preparation for inclusion?*
3. *What complexities do you believe exist in this program that render teacher preparation for inclusion a challenging task to perform?*

The policy documents included in this study were reviewed to identify the principles of inclusive education practice in schools and those associated with the preparation of teachers for diverse classrooms in Ontario, as well as to assist in the formulation of the interview questions. These documents were indeed helpful in the conceptualization of inclusion and the professional and ethical aspects of teaching and learning in Ontario's inclusive classrooms, as exemplified in the participants' responses. Further, these documents revolved around major themes such as (a) inclusive education policy guidelines and practice in schools, (b) students' diversity in Ontario classrooms, (c) teachers' ethical and professional role in eliminating systematic barriers for all students' success, and (d) frameworks and recommendations for teachers on how to create welcoming and inclusive classroom environments.

### ***Participants***

A purposive sampling was used to select the study participants. Merriam (1998) maintains that "purposive sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insights and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 61). Therefore, non-probability purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) was the most appropriate technique to use. These participants included the four coordinators of the teacher education program who are themselves faculty members involved in course design, course development, as well as in coordinating the program's various instructors. These coordinators are identified in the findings section as PC1, PC2, PC3, and PC4. The coordinators' academic background was centered around culturally-responsive curriculum, psychology, special education, and language education. They had between 20 and 35 years of professional experience in schools, teacher education, and educational administration combined.

### ***Data Analysis and Procedure***

Analyzing data through a case study approach follows a particular pattern in which the researcher collects, organizes, and analyzes the data in ways that help in the construction of a systematic and in-depth understanding of the case (Patton, 2002). Moreover, data collection, its organization and analysis, were driven by the research questions, the scholarly literature, and the theoretical framework adopted. A content analysis that is thematic and deductive (Patton, 2002) has been deployed to develop codes, patterns, and themes from the participants' data and the policy documents reviewed. Data analysis (Miles et al., 2014) of the participants' interview transcripts encompassed multiple readings to identify codes that reflect the study's purpose and the research questions. These codes have led to the emergence of three major themes: (a) *Coordinators developing positive beliefs and values towards inclusive education among teacher candidates*, (b) *The means of adopting inclusion and teacher education policies*, and (c) *Concerns about the program's design: A call for curriculum policy change*.

### ***Member Checking and Triangulation***

The interview transcripts and their analysis were sent to the study participants for review and to suggest any changes they feel necessary as they might wish according to Homan (1991) that their concerns are 'represented in the most acceptable light' (p. 127). Furthermore, researchers need to build a sense of trust with their respondents by demonstrating that the confidentiality, anonymity, and the interests of the latter are honored (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To improve the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1999), data triangulation was used by depending on different sources of data to support overlapping interpretations and conclusions.

## Findings

The findings describe the three major themes that emerged during data analysis, illuminating the various perspectives and institutional practices of the program coordinators in relation to inclusive education and how inclusion-related teacher education policies are embodied in the examined teacher education program. Moreover, the findings bring forward the structural issues around the design of the examined program, the challenges faced by the coordinators to support pre-service teacher preparation for inclusion, as well as some recommendations for future teacher education programming. Each theme in the findings, supported by relevant quotes, represents a collective summary of the participants' responses and reflecting the aspects of inclusive practices addressed in the policy documents reviewed. It is worth noting again here that the concept of inclusion in this study is not attributed to a specific group of individuals such as those with learning difficulties or physical disabilities for instance but instead to the umbrella that accounts for all aspects of diversity among learners in schools including social, cultural, learning, socio-economic, religious, and gender diversity among other factors.

The study aimed to have an in-depth understanding of the institutional logics of a teacher education program from the perspectives of its four coordinators towards preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive teaching. Significant attention was paid to the influence of inclusion and teacher education-related policies on the practices of these coordinators.

### *Values and Beliefs: Creating Positivity towards Inclusion among Teacher Candidates*

The program coordinators expressed different logics on the significance of inclusive education and the need for its principles to be part of future teachers' practices in schools. According to PC2, the inclusion approach followed in the program is in line with the standards of professional practice issued by the OCT which encourage pre-service teachers to acquire the knowledge about the relevant pedagogies and practices that support all learners. Inclusive education for PC1 calls upon recognizing "human diversity in all of its facets, understanding the linguistic and cultural diversity and how people learn". She adds that, by the end of the program, the hope is that teacher candidates have developed inclusive teaching skills and proactive attitudes towards all learners (PC1).

The coordinators were found to be keen on negotiating the beliefs that exist among pre-service teachers towards inclusion and diverse learners in Ontario classrooms. Following the guidelines of inclusion policies and its practice in schools, one coordinator said, "We aim to disrupt their thinking until they start to recognize that we need to actually do things differently for different people" (PC4). Moreover, the use of case studies about diverse learners and their diverse learning needs in schools as noted by PC3, allows future teachers to better conceptualize inclusion and its dynamics in the school system. Case studies, PC3 argued, are helpful in the sense that they bring practical inclusion-related scenarios experienced in schools to the teacher education program.

### *The means of Adopting Inclusion and Teacher Education Policies*

The Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) governs the teaching profession in the province and follows an accreditation process to qualify eligible teacher education programs. PC1 shared that the principles of inclusive education and the OCT's inclusion-related requirements are embedded in the practices of all instructors in this program. PC4 noted that when new policies are issued by the OCT or the Ministry of Education, they are communicated by the teacher education office. In turn, PCs revise their courses' outlines and the teaching practices accordingly.

PCs were aware of the EIE (OME, 2014) policy document and the necessity to equip pre-service teachers with the skills and knowledge they need to practice inclusion in Ontario schools. Reflecting on her institutional practice, PC1 explained, "I am responsible to ensure that my students learn about all the laws that apply to them as members of OCT, and about all Ministry's curriculum documents and policies". For PC1, all PCs need to further explore inclusion-related matters that pertain to their different domains of teaching and research in order to support future teachers' preparation for inclusion.

Ongoing communication and collaboration within and beyond the program, PC2 added, are common practices that keep the program's curriculum content and pre-service teachers' knowledge up to date, particularly in relation to inclusion. Some of the practices shared by the coordinators included

engaging pre-service teachers with practice-based research papers about inclusion policies and student diversity, as well as inviting parents and practicing teachers to share their experiences with inclusion. PC4 said that she offers her pre-service teachers several choices to express their learning by allowing them to use portfolios, charts, short-videos, and oral presentations. “It is my belief that if we don’t model good practice and articulate why we are doing what we are doing, then these future teachers won’t leave our program with sound ideas about inclusion” (PC4). Describing her collaborative practice, PC1 noted that she regularly works with her team of instructors to ensure that pre-service teachers are developing their knowledge about the cultural and linguistic diversity that exist in today’s classrooms. She said, “We frame our language and literacy teaching in the program from the outset by considering the social and cultural diversity of all children in schools, not only those for whom English is their first language”. For example, PC1 engages them in debates on culturally-diverse learners and their needs in the Canadian classroom and how to utilize differentiated instruction as an inclusive learning tool to improve students’ access to learning and classroom participation.

According to PC2, having compulsory courses in their program that discuss various inclusion issues in schools reflects the values and beliefs that the program upholds concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion, and the importance of developing teachers who are inclusion-oriented. PC4 added that the institutional emphasis on inclusive education has shifted the language and the discourses around inclusion in this teacher education program. For example, previous views on students with exceptionalities were based on deficits that exist within the child while the focus now got shifted to how can we build on the strengths of the child who presents a form or another of exceptionality and improve our education systems accordingly. However, PC4 argued that for inclusive education to be a reality in this program, “it has to be embedded in the design of all courses otherwise it’s a vision that remains at the level of rhetoric”. For example, PC4 believes that the program courses need to bring pre-service teachers closer to diverse learners and their various needs in today’s classrooms, and further engage them with the current policies and procedures that pertain to inclusive education. This includes teaching them more on what is differentiated instruction and how to use universal design for learning to develop creative, inclusive lesson plans that support diverse learners’ needs and learning styles.

### *Concerns about the Program’s Design: A Call for Curriculum Policy Change*

In brief, the examined teacher education program prepares Ontario future teachers for different areas in education, such as early childhood, mathematics, psychology, technology, and mental health, to mention a few. The organizational structure of the program includes compulsory and elective courses in the university classroom, up to 200 hours of in-school practical experience, various optional onsite professional learning opportunities and workshops, and a compulsory community-based field experience. The community-based field experience, also known as *alternative-to-practicum*, offers pre-service teachers a chance to engage with cultural and social diversity in the surrounding communities to improve their conceptualization of inclusion through a lived experience. To complete the alternative-to-practicum component, these candidates attend non-school settings where teaching and learning also happen, such as museums, educational camps, and centers that offer different educational programs.

When asked about the program’s instructors and their awareness of inclusion, PC2 explained that in this teacher education program, “All instructors value inclusion, as many of them have been teachers themselves and some continue to teach in the school system”. Nevertheless, PC4 believed that educators at the university and at the school, both need to be inclusive-oriented with relevant professional development, so they can model an inclusive practice in their respective classrooms.

While addressing Indigenous knowledge in the program’s design as an inclusion matter by the researcher, PC4 said that when pre-service teachers come back from their practicum, “We see that they start talking about individual students and understanding what this inclusion is all about”. Further, PC4 indicated that, although pre-service teachers are not yet well prepared to teach in Indigenous teaching settings, this program has “been bringing more Indigenous ways of knowing, experience, and expertise to the university classrooms”. Other organizational challenges in the teacher education program as noted by PCs included the lack of time for pre-service teachers to deeply engage with any course material due to the heavy course loads in each stream, as well as the practicum design, all of which can impact their preparation for a highly demanding profession.



The study found that pre-service teachers in the elementary stream who are expecting to teach French or teach in Catholic schools in particular face a big challenge in this program, as they are required to take a higher number of courses. Those who are taking extra courses, according to PC1, struggle to focus on and understand any given course. In her view, “it would be fantastic if we could have some common strategies or even better synthesis across all these different courses”. In relation to the practicum and its role in supporting pre-service teacher preparation for the inclusive classroom, PC2 said, “As instructed by the OCT, we cannot place our pre-service teachers in a practicum with an associate teacher who has special qualifications”, an institutional guideline that she does not feel happy about. Special qualifications are additional qualifications such as special education specialty courses obtained by general education teachers as an ongoing self-professional development. Associate teachers are those who mentor and supervise pre-service teachers during their practical experience in schools.

The coordinators believed that a policy change in their program’s curriculum would render pre-service teacher preparation, particularly for inclusive education, a less challenging task. For example, PC3 believed that additional and shorter practicum blocks are more helpful as they create more space for constructive feedback that would simultaneously benefit both pre-service teachers and the instructors of the program. The practicum for PC4 is “part of what feeds and nourishes our thinking and understanding about what is happening with our candidates in schools”. Relatedly, PC1 noted that this program needs to be a venue for collaboration between future teachers and the graduate students who are attending the faculty’s graduate professional programs. For her, this collaboration would be an opportunity for pre-service teachers to benefit from cutting-edge inclusion-related projects that inform their future professional practice.

## Discussion

After reporting the study findings, it was crucial to offer a discussion that particularly focus on the meanings and practices of the coordinators in the examined teacher education program. Through the lens of NI, the goal was to have an in-depth understanding of how these coordinators enact the principles of inclusion embedded in teacher education and inclusive education policies to support pre-service teacher preparation for inclusive teaching. This discussion elaborates on the different findings obtained in light of the literature, the research questions, and the theoretical framework.

The program coordinators have expressed various beliefs and practices that illuminated their logics (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999) in relation to inclusive education. Some of the practices reported included teaching about how to use different tools to assess learning, discussing inclusive and exclusive practices in Ontario classrooms, and asking pre-service teachers to reflect on a continuum of beliefs towards inclusion. The logics about inclusion among these coordinators in light of the policies reviewed reflected three concepts (a) inclusion is a promising educational approach that would support all learners, (b) a practice that requires robust collaboration (Forlin & Chambers, 2011), and c) it is necessary to create positive mindsets among future teachers towards students’ diversity and learning needs.

In order to consolidate their logics around inclusion, the coordinators reported additional specific practices they sought in this program to support pre-service teacher preparation for inclusive teaching. Such practices included 1) investing in case studies research about exceptional learners and encouraging group activities that are focused on how to create supportive learning environments, 2) emphasizing the ethical and professional guidelines of the teaching profession (OCT, 2013) that teachers need to adhere to in Ontario’s classrooms, and 3) seeking to create spaces and time for more critical discussions about inclusion and its policy practices in schools. The practices described by the participants suggest that they have strong beliefs towards inclusive education. Some of these beliefs include the need for all students to feel supported regardless of their different backgrounds, and that teachers build on students’ individual strengths and diversity to advance learning (OME, 2009, 2014, 2014a).

According to the coordinators, inclusion should be viewed as a holistic educational and institutional approach that includes realizing the substantial role of all actors involved in the process of schooling, and the adoption of inclusive pedagogies and assessment strategies that support all learners. However, conforming to previous studies, the practice of inclusion in schools is not only subject to the teacher education program itself (e.g., the program’s structure as reported by the coordinators), but extends to the existing rules, regulations, and restrictions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 2006) associated with inclusive education. This institutional framing could be evidenced in (a) acknowledging the lack of resources for

special education in Ontario schools and (b) the number of administrative duties that current practicing teachers in the province are required to do such as school reports, parent-teacher meetings, and individual education plans for students identified with exceptionalities.

The analysis, as exemplified by the participants' responses, proposes that the examined program could engage its pre-service teachers in more discussions that seek to critically negotiate the discourses and the challenges to practice inclusive education in different classroom contexts. This would help them to avoid internalizing (Zucker, 1991) a simplistic and normalized view of inclusion and its policy enactment as a decontextualized, straightforward process that is likewise performed across all educational institutions. Furthermore, the analysis of the findings reflected a more complex idea about the practice of inclusion than what the EIE (OME, 2014) document portrays. The EIE presented a normative view about inclusion as the driving force for teaching, assessment, and student success. Although the coordinators of the examined program were keen on challenging the mindsets of those attending teacher education towards inclusion, some program-related institutional constraints (Meyer & Rowan 1977; Scott, 1995) have impacted their practice in this regard. These constraints revolved around the curriculum design, including the limited number of hours assigned to each course in the program and the high number of courses that pre-service teachers are dealing with. While these factors may serve the macrolevel interests of the program (e.g. accreditation and funding), the current curriculum design was found limiting the coordinators' capacity to engage pre-service teachers in complex and difficult conversations that pertain to race, ability, religion, gender, and sexual identities in Ontario schools. Although these diversity-related issues are crucial for inclusion and its implementation in schools by experienced and novice teachers alike, a policy change in the program's curriculum structure to advance the discussions of these topics is suggested. Thus, ensuring that the principles of inclusion policy are embedded in this program's curricula and modeled by all its instructors is certainly substantial for helping future teachers enact inclusive teaching in schools and in negotiating their own logics towards the concepts of teaching and learning in the inclusive classroom.

The findings revealed that more inclusive practice-oriented dialogues are needed among the program's coordinators to help in (1) aligning their different logics around inclusion and (2) building a robust and coherent program that enhances pre-service teacher preparation for the inclusive classroom. These findings conform to previous studies (Ainscow, 2012; Ainscow et al., 2006; Mittler, 2000) that conceptualized inclusion as an institutional matter that needs to guide the work of all of those involved in students' learning as well as to problematize the prevailing discourses that pertain to inclusion in schools and in higher education.

## **Conclusion**

This study suggested that more learning and discussion about the various aspects of inclusion in schools need to occur among the actors engaged in this particular teacher education program. These discussions pertained to inclusion policy enactment in schools and the associated challenges that currently practicing teachers face in supporting a growing body of diverse learners. One of the promising means to advance inclusion preparation for pre-service teachers, as the study revealed, is by integrating the program's courses that have similar content and adopt more inclusive teaching pedagogies that reflect the aims and objectives of the EIE policy document and those of the Ontario College of Teachers. The theory of New-Institutionalism (NI) has offered a new perspective to understand the complexities of institutions and how they influence the practices of individuals inside institutions. Moreover, NI has illuminated how an institutional constraint, such as the program's prevailing curriculum design, shapes the interpretations made by the coordinators regarding preparing pre-service teachers for inclusion. It also showed how individuals' agency, beliefs, and practices continue to be framed by the existing policies and policy discourses that relate to inclusive education and teacher education.

These findings may serve as a starting point to further develop inclusion-driven teacher education programmatic curricula that take into consideration the continuous evolution of students' demographics in the K-12 settings. Furthermore, this study could inform future teacher education and inclusion policy-making processes as it highlights the necessity for considering the different interpretations that exist among policy actors in different institutions and how these interpretations may, at some point, contradict or expand the objectives of a given policy.

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