

# Rethinking Teacher Education for Inclusion: A Literature Review

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*Abstract: This article constitutes a literature review on teacher education for inclusion. The review examines related Canadian and international research from a policy perspective and argues for reconsidering the concept of inclusion in teacher education programming to further advance the learning experiences of those who come from diverse backgrounds. The review sheds light on the existing views, beliefs, and policy practices of those involved in teacher education and attends to the processes of translating inclusion policy principles into the practices of practitioners situated in various school contexts. Further, the review examines issues of funding along with the organizational and instructional strategies that would promote teacher education for inclusion in Ontario and beyond. A concluding summary and implications for future research are offered.*

*Keywords: Teacher Education, Inclusive Education, Pre-Service Teachers, Practice, Enactment*

## Introduction

As today's classrooms continue to move towards a more inclusive teaching approach to support students of diverse backgrounds and learning needs, attention to how pre-service teachers are being prepared for inclusive teaching practices becomes relevant. Inclusive education is the educational approach through which *all* children learn together in the same classroom regardless of their race, gender, religion, individual learning needs, socio-economic level, and cultural backgrounds (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994). Research on teacher education for inclusive education (DeLuca, 2012; Forlin, 2010a; Loreman, 2010) showed that most studies have mainly focused on pre-service teachers' instructional skills towards supporting students with special education needs (e.g., McCray & McHatton, 2011; Rose & Garner, 2010; Wang & Fitch, 2010). Other studies examined how pre-service teachers' attitudes and beliefs (Loreman, 2010; Shade & Stewart, 2001; Sharma, 2010; Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008; Specht et al., 2016; Sharma & Sokal, 2015) impact their future professional practices towards supporting students with exceptionalities.

From a policy perspective and situated in the fields of teacher education and inclusive education, this literature review covers national and international studies in an attempt to extract findings that would benefit the Canadian context. Studies reviewed included those that examined the adoption of inclusive education policy in schools, the enactment of inclusion in teacher education through programmatic curriculum and practica settings, and the means to support future teachers to enact inclusive teaching practices that reflect an awareness of the various critical dimensions of inclusion. Research studies selected for this review constituted those that had a focus on teacher education for the inclusive classroom, how inclusion and its policies are enacted in schools, inclusive-oriented curricula and practicum in teacher education, and the promotion of positive beliefs and attitudes towards inclusion among future teachers.

## Theoretical Framework

The notion of policy enactment (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012) was used as the theoretical lens in this study. Policy enactment attends to the ways policy actors such as teacher educators, program coordinators, pre-service and in-service teachers interpret policies such as those of inclusive education and teacher education and translate them into their contextualized practices. For Viczko and Riveros (2015), understanding how policy informs practice allows us to understand "the realities for those affected by policies and conceptualizing the ways in which things might be differently performed" (p. 480). They argue that the analysis of policy processes should avoid portraying schools as organizations without a wider social context, a key principle in policy enactment research (Viczko & Riveros, 2015). Similarly, in researching policy enactment in higher education, Sin (2014) suggests the need to consider two important factors: the policy process itself, including the making and the enactment of it, as well as the policy actors.

Different policy actors perform different set of actions based on their own beliefs, prior experiences, meanings, and agency. In turn, the variation of practices and meanings fosters our understanding of how given policies such as those of inclusive education are translated into practices. For Sin (2014), the policy actors and the context are important factors in the process of negotiating, constructing, and enacting policy. She contends that the beliefs of policy actors regarding a particular policy relate to the policy's contextual circumstances. Such a relation tends to impact the enactment of the policy and its outcomes (Sin, 2014).

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this paper is to argue that research on teacher education for inclusion in K-12 settings should not solely focus on students identified with special education needs such as those with emotional and behavioral exceptionalities, learning disabilities, or physical disabilities, but to further consider other groups that go under the umbrella of inclusion. These groups include diverse learners who come from different social, cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. To support these learners, teacher education needs to seek the development of various instructional, professional, and organizational practices of future teachers. The Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) recognizes diversity as:

The presence of a wide range of social characteristics within a group, organization, or society. The dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited to, age, ancestry, colour, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, gender expression, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion or faith, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic circumstance. (CODE, 2014, p. 16)

## Literature Review

Across Canada, most of the studies that have examined teacher education and inclusion have mainly focused on pre-service teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special learning needs, rather than towards the inclusion of students who express multiple identities and abilities (Ryan, 2009; Sharma et al., 2008; Sharma & Sokal, 2015). What follows is a thorough review of studies associated with teacher education for inclusion and inclusive teaching practices.

### The Challenges of Inclusive Education in Non-Canadian Contexts

According to Forlin (2010b), the complex factors that obstruct a significant adoption of inclusive education to take place at schools in Hong Kong include lack of teachers' autonomy and inclusion experiences, fixed curricula, and high working demands. To overcome the challenges of adopting an inclusive education model, the external control on students' achievement, such as testing requirements, should be minimized to allow classroom teachers to develop their inclusive skills and monitor their students' academic progress (Forlin, 2010b). Poon-McBrayer and Wong (2013) found that translating the inclusive education policy into practices in Hong Kong continues to be challenging due to lack of relevant resources for teachers and shared collaboration. Therefore, context-relevant policies "together with systemic changes, values building, personnel training, and resources are among the core components to succeed in this reform and ensure that no child is left behind" (Poon-McBrayer & Wong, 2013, p. 1524).

In the Australian context, inclusive education seems to be decontextualized. In this regard, Bourke (2010) argued that the inclusive education policy models are being introduced in the school system without significant attention to the ways they impact both teachers and students. She noted that although many initiatives towards inclusive education have been offered, school structures and strategies continue to reflect an exclusive practice and teachers continue to feel confused and frustrated about the term 'inclusion' (Bourke, 2010). Given the fact that professional development for teachers is necessary, using it to exclusively reinforce professional standards has placed further pressure on practicing teachers interested in developing inclusive education strategies that respond to students' diversity (Bourke, 2010).

Given the inclusivity challenges that exist in schools and the overwhelming workloads that in-service teachers continue to report, understanding how teacher education programs develop responsive and diversity-oriented teachers is significant (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005). In the US, Darling-Hammond (2006) found that teacher education research needs to examine ways that help in the development of teacher education programs that represent coherence in their aims, curriculum structure, and field-based experiences. These programs, in her view, allow pre-service teachers to overcome their challenges in making "sense of disparate, unconnected experiences" (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 306). Reflecting on classroom diversity and the need for an advanced inclusive teaching practices in schools, Rosenberg and Walther-Thomas (2014) noted that teachers' preparation to practice in multifaceted and diverse school environments must be examined.

Recognizing the international push towards inclusive education and the critical role of teachers in fostering an inclusive classroom environment, Fullan (2001) contends that improvement in education does not exist until issues of teacher education, such as teacher preparation for inclusion, are taken seriously. These research studies reflect the

idea that inclusive education remains a contested concept in the educational organizations and education policymaking circles.

### **Canadian Research: Coherence in Teacher Education Programming for Inclusion**

A published report about inclusive education by the Council of Ministers of Education in Canada (2008) identified the inclusion approach as a challenging one. According to the report, it takes a serious contribution from all of those concerned about inclusion and diversity to eliminate the barriers to all students' success.

In a study that examined the meaning of inclusion among pre-service teachers, Specht (2016) found that the adoption of inclusive practices occurs when teachers are "comfortable with the use of appropriate pedagogy and when they believe that all students can learn and should be included in heterogeneous classrooms" (p. 894). She adds that developing the capacity of pre-service teachers as well as their competency for inclusive practices is challenging (Specht, 2016). Teacher education plays a crucial role in developing teachers who can practice inclusive teaching in today's classrooms. Rioux (2007) noted that the progress of the Canadian inclusive education is evident as it continues to advance and promote an equitable education for all learners not only those with exceptionalities. In her view, such a growth requires new teaching standards to be in place to better support future teachers' practices (Rioux, 2007).

According to Loreman (2010), Alberta pre-service teachers had concerns about how to successfully practice in the inclusive classroom and accommodate students' learning diversity. Yet, Loreman (2010) argues that those concerns have not always been addressed by teacher education programs. Relatedly, Forlin (2010a) believed that these programs are now required to incorporate inclusive-oriented values and practices in their curricula so new teachers can positively respond to students' diversity and contribute to opposing marginalization and stigmatization.

In the same vein, Loreman (2010) claimed that future inclusive practitioners have essential needs. These needs include understanding inclusion and respecting students' diversity, collaborating with parents and colleagues to develop inclusive instructional methods and assessments, seeking a continuous professional development by consulting education research and using a reflective practice, as well as developing abilities to foster an inclusive social environment in the classroom (Loreman, 2010).

In his study about promoting inclusivity in teacher education, DeLuca (2012) found that multiple interpretations of this construct exist in teacher education programs, a fact that results in multimodal learning and teaching experiences in relation to inclusive education. He argues that future research must engage "with the complexities of promoting inclusivity as a multi-dimensional construct and the necessity of a coherent and explicit framework for inclusivity to guide pre-service programming" (DeLuca, 2012, p. 566).

### **The Role of Diverse Classroom Contexts in Preparing Pre-Service Teachers for Inclusion**

Offering a practical experience for pre-service teachers in unfamiliar contexts is crucial for developing their inclusive-oriented practices (Rusznyak & Walton, 2017). Rogers-Adkinson and Fridley (2016) found that "the development of pedagogical skills in the interactive aspects of teaching is left almost entirely to field experiences, the component of professional education over which we have little control" (p. 541). Unfamiliar contexts help pre-service teachers to develop the ability to express a culturally-responsive and context-informed pedagogy and to reflect on their own beliefs towards students' diversity (Rusznyak & Walton, 2017). Therefore, teacher education programs need to provide suitable practicum placements for pre-service teachers' where their skills, beliefs, and attitudes towards inclusion are fostered. These placements need to help future teachers to develop their capacity to engage in a student-teacher relationship that seeks to promote students' learning (Rogers-Adkinson & Fridley, 2016).

The practicum placement for Rusznyak and Walton (2017) is a venue where pre-service teachers learn how to embrace inclusion or perhaps defer to practices that marginalize some learners in schools. Spooner, Algozzine, Wood, and Hicks (2010) claimed that teacher preparation for inclusion is a "fundamental strategy for improving our schools and, hence, the quality of life of the children who attend them" (p. 50). Therefore, ensuring practicum placements in diverse classroom contexts will ultimately help in shaping the beliefs and the practices of pre-service teachers towards diverse learners.

McCray and McHatton (2011) argued that although inclusive skills and dispositions are significant, future teachers continue to feel poorly prepared to practice inclusion and navigate inclusion resources that support diverse learners. Having said that, the practical experiences in which pre-service teachers are engaged with need to be exemplars that present the teaching profession as the practice that enables rather than disables learning (Rusznyak & Walton, 2017).

### **Teacher Education, Inclusion, and the Issue of Funding**

In Ontario, with the introduction of the Enhanced Teacher Education Program (Ontario College of Teachers, 2013), the number of teacher candidates admitted to teacher education programs has been reduced by half with less funding per each candidate admitted (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations [OCUFA], 2013). Such changes were believed to disadvantage the learning of teacher candidates and threaten the quality of teacher education (OCUFA, 2013) and, in turn, the quality of inclusive education practices at schools. From an international perspective, Slee (2010) believes that appropriate funding for inclusive education approaches contributes to the construction of inclusive curricula and pedagogies that can support the education of all learners. In the same vein, Miles and Ahuja (2007) noted that a review of the literature about the education systems reflects a struggle in coping with teachers who are poorly trained for diversity and inclusion along with insufficient budgets. Thus, it becomes a concern to understand how teachers can be prepared for inclusive classrooms when funding challenges persist, given the necessity of multiple resources (e.g. material, instructional, and financial) to accommodate students' various individual learning needs.

### **Fostering Inclusion: Multimodal Pedagogies in Teacher Education**

With the development of more inclusive education policies worldwide, Forlin (2010c) concluded that teacher education needs to provide future teachers with inclusive skills and pedagogies. These elements are fundamental for enhancing teachers' competency and capability to address the needs of all learners in the Canadian classroom (McCrimmon, 2015). For Specht (2013), "teachers who meet the diverse needs of their students are more likely to have children and youth in their classrooms who perceive school, themselves, and each other favourably" (p. 18). In collaboration with the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, BC, Canada, Crocker and Dibbon (2008) noted that Canadian teachers are expected to express new competencies that include a capacity to teach diverse students, as well as a capacity for collaboration, research work, and the use of technology in the inclusive classroom.

One of the pedagogical approaches used by Theoharis and Causton-Theoharis (2011) was the development of a pre-designed inclusive lesson-planning template as a tool to be used by pre-service teachers during practicum. Their study revealed that over 80% of pre-service teachers found the template helpful for the process of their progressive learning and in understanding the variety of instructional techniques. Examining practices, Wang and Fitch (2010) investigated the co-teaching element in teacher education. They found that "although both inclusion and collaboration models have been in practice for two decades, few currently employed teachers have received specific training" (p. 113) in co-teaching. Co-teaching is a supportive approach through which two teachers work collaboratively in the same classroom sharing instruction, planning, and management of classroom activities (Wang & Fitch, 2010).

In Italy, Bartolo (2010) studied the impact of an e-learning module in developing collaborative practices among prospective teachers. His study showed that the module has offered pre-service teachers a chance to engage in a socially constructed learning through collaboration and reflective practice, which are two important tools for the success of today's teachers. An international study that included Canada, Sharma et al. (2008) found that teacher education programs need to rethink their curriculum and instructional practices to ensure that prospective teachers are ready to interact with all learners. In Canada, DeLuca (2012) reviewed instructional practices in teacher education that support inclusion. He found that whether inclusion is integrated in all courses or being addressed in stand-alone specialty courses, both strategies can support pre-service teacher preparation for inclusion (DeLuca, 2012).

## **Pre-Service Teachers' Perspectives Towards the Practice of Inclusion**

Diversity is evidenced in the multiple social, ethnic, racial, linguistic, sexual, gender identities, and levels of ability that exist in the inclusive classrooms. Studies have shown that teacher education programs that engage prospective teachers with a variety of learners in schools, enhance teachers' positive attitudes towards the meanings of inclusion (Chambers & Forlin, 2010a; Forlin, 2010b).

In their study, Sharma and Sokal (2015) found that research on ways that influence prospective teachers' views towards inclusive practices is scarce. Further, Sharma and Sokal (2015) examined pre-service teachers' reflections on two stand-alone courses that relate to beliefs, concerns, and efficacy for teaching in the inclusive classroom in one Australian and one Canadian university. Pre-service teachers in the Canadian university were found to have fewer concerns about inclusion (Sharma & Sokal, 2015). A few years earlier, a similar study conducted by Sharma et al. (2008) across four countries, including Canada, discovered similar results. Pedagogy and content for Sharma et al. (2008) are two important actors in teacher education programs that can affect prospective teachers' attitudes towards inclusion.

In the US, the study by Shade and Stewart (2001) concluded that successful inclusion in the classroom relates to the ways teacher education programs influence prospective teachers' attitudes. Fostering positive attitudes towards inclusion for Sharma (2010) requires training about students' diversity and learning needs in ways that help pre-service teachers develop inclusive practices and beliefs. According to a study by Lambe and Bones (2006), pre-service teachers believed that successful inclusion practices depend on class size, time management, the availability of classroom assistants, and adequate inclusion-oriented training.

In Ontario, Ryan (2009) investigated pre-service teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. He found that although pre-service teachers felt ready to practice inclusion, they expressed concerns about the teaching demands, time constraints, support, and resources that impact, in the pre-service teachers' view, effective inclusive practices (Ryan, 2009). An earlier study by Brackenreed and Barnett (2006) examined pre-service teachers' conceptualization of their capacity to manage students' behavior in the inclusive classroom and found them less concerned about their skills in this regard.

## **The Need for Inclusive-Oriented and Responsive Curricula in Teacher Education**

Goodnough, Falkenberg, and MacDonald (2016) found that the continuous change in the Canadian K-12 settings influences the structure of teacher education programs and the pedagogies adopted, a fact that shapes future teachers' practices in the inclusive classroom. For Goodnough et al. (2016), due to the teaching challenges that future teachers will eventually face, teacher education programs' personnel need to visualize the content and pedagogy of teacher education from a more practical point of view.

Specht (2016) found that pre-service teachers had doubts "in their own ability, in the concept of inclusion, and whether or not all students are capable of being included" (p. 895). In her view, the integration of different inclusion-related instructional approaches and strategies such as Universal Design for Learning in teacher education curricula can promote pre-service teachers' understanding of the right to inclusion of all learners (Specht, 2016). Universal Design for Learning has been defined as the "theoretical framework that guides the design of environments, materials, and instruction, to ensure that all students can access and learn from the curriculum" (Specht, 2013, p. 18). Rusznyak and Walton (2017) view inclusive pedagogy as the central piece of inclusive education. For them, inclusive pedagogy enables learning and achievement for all students and allows them to feel more engaged.

Kim (2011) contends that pre-service teachers need to learn how to modify instruction as needed and learn how to collaborate with their colleagues while sharing knowledge about pedagogical approaches. The four areas of knowledge and skills that pre-service teachers must be prepared for, according to Bransford et al. (2005), 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). For Rioux (2007), teacher preparation for inclusion would require teacher education programs to have "structural or systemic strategies, widely communicated policy, flexible curriculum, and the provision of quality materials, ongoing teacher training and support for teachers" (p. 113). In addition, supporting pre-service teachers through exemplary field-

based experiences is crucial as they can better conceptualize the process of teaching and learning in classrooms that represent student diversity.

### **Inclusion, Teacher Education, and the Collaborative Practices**

In the US, Keefe, Rossi, de Valenzuela, and Howarth (2000) noted that examining how future teachers can “work with populations that historically have not been part of the dialogue surrounding general school reform initiatives” (p. 73) is vital. They argued that the shift towards inclusive education requires an active collaboration between all stakeholders including teacher educators, associate teachers, and administrators in schools and universities. Relatedly, Forlin and Chambers (2011) noted that due to the critical role of teachers in children’s learning, universities and school systems should continue to collaborate and construct informed and competent teachers who can accommodate and inspire all learners in the inclusive classroom. The need to examine collaboration practices in teacher preparation programs was also highlighted in the study of Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman, and Merbler (2010). Harvey et al. (2010) believed that collaboration with associate teachers and other professionals in the community assists prospective teachers in developing their inclusive teaching practices and problem-solving skills. Collaboration helps future teachers to modify curriculum, adopt specific strategies that meet the needs of all learners, and to have positive attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion (Forlin, 2010a).

### **Summary**

Advancing the inclusive education approach and teacher preparation to support diverse learners appeared to rest upon the creation of more inclusive curricula in teacher education (Benner & Judge, 2000; Rouse, 2010) and more concerted collaboration (Ainscow, 2007; Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Harvey et al., 2010; Keefe et al., 2000) among all of those involved in teacher education. Nonetheless, the need for further empirical research on teacher preparation to support students of diverse backgrounds was evident in multiple studies (e.g., Ainscow, 2007; Rosenberg & Walther-Thomas, 2014; Specht et al., 2016; Spooner et al., 2010).

Overall, this review of the literature has emphasized the need to further examine how prospective teachers are being prepared for inclusive education from a perspective that goes beyond addressing the specific learning needs of students identified with exceptionalities. It showed that inclusive education continues to be a contested concept with practices that are contextually situated. The review has indicated that various pedagogical approaches need to be brought forward into teacher education to support pre-service teacher preparation for a more comprehensive inclusive education. More inclusion-driven curricula in teacher education and practical experiences in diverse school settings were found crucial to foster pre-service teachers’ capacity to practice inclusion and positively respond to the learning needs of diverse learners. Moreover, the literature indicated that more discussions about students of diverse social, cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds in teacher education are relevant and timely as they help in shaping the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of pre-service teachers towards inclusion and how to advance the academic experience of all learners.

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