Research paper

Teacher self-efficacy and inclusive education practices: Rethinking teachers' engagement with inclusive practices

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Low and high efficacy teachers held similar philosophical understanding about inclusive education.
- High efficacy teachers' practices focus on student success, accessibility and building confidence.
- Low efficacy teachers' practices focus on behaviour management, regularly viewing the differences among students.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the relationship between 41 primary teachers' self-efficacy and inclusive education practices across New South Wales, Australia. Thematic analysis was employed to examine and probe the qualitative data. Findings reveal that while teachers with high and low efficacy had similar conceptual understanding about inclusive education, their teaching practices differed. Informing teachers about what inclusive education is may only have limited impact on teachers' actual inclusive education practices. More support in how teachers can apply the concept of inclusive education to practice may be needed so that their beliefs in their capabilities to teach inclusively are fostered and bolstered.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Inclusion in education

Since the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 1994), there has been continued advocacy for inclusion and a global commitment to encourage and improve education for all (Ainscow, 2020). The Statement, which was agreed upon by 92 governments and 25 organisations internationally, affirmed that every individual has a right to education and to achieve their full learning potential within mainstream educational settings (UNESCO, 1994). Inclusion in education means that regardless of individual differences or students' “unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs” (UNESCO, 1994, p. 8), all students are welcomed, cared for, and equally valued, and are provided with fair and equitable learning, participation, and educational opportunities (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; 2011). In New South Wales, Australia, the site of this current study, inclusive education is defined as an education system in which “all students, regardless of disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation or faith, can access and fully participate in learning, alongside their similar aged peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs” (New South Wales Department of Education (NSW DoE), 2021, p. 1).

The philosophy of inclusive education recognises that every student has their own unique learning strengths and needs, and educational systems need to appreciate and accommodate this diversity, and importantly, make sure that this is able to occur within mainstream classes at students' local schools (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; UNESCO, 1994). Student agency and self-determination are fostered (NSW DoE, 2021) and each student's
unique contributions within the learning environment are valued (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF, n. d.). Discriminating and stigmatizing attitudes, such as towards students with a disability, are addressed (UNICEF, n. d.). Teachers who believe in inclusive education do not view individual difference and diversity as problematic (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). They do not ask students to ‘fit’ the existing educational environments (see Finkelstein et al., 2021; UNESCO, 1994). Furthermore, they do not believe that students should be segregated into special classes or special schools (see Ainscow, 2020) because they have additional learning needs. Inclusion is considered both a process which involves identifying and removing barriers to access, learning, and achievement for all students (Ainscow, 2020), and as an ideal result or outcome of such practices (Antoninis et al., 2020).

To assist schools to turn the philosophy of inclusion into inclusive educational actions, Booth and Ainscow (2002; 2011) developed the Index for Inclusion. They recognised that for some schools, improving inclusivity may require substantial change not only to the teaching practices occurring inside and outside of the classroom, but within staffrooms and the school’s relationships with parents, carers and the community. Others have similarly supported the notion that inclusion requires a whole-school approach (see Dally et al., 2019; Subban et al., 2022), seeing inclusion embedded in everyday practices and “all aspects of school life” (NSW DoE, 2021, p. 1). Booth and Ainscow (2002; 2011) recommend efforts for inclusive educational actions be focused on three dimensions: developing inclusive policy, inclusive culture, and inclusive practice.

1.2. Inclusion in action

Inclusive school policies provide the foundation that see schools are accessible to all students and staff; admittance to the school is enabled, and barriers to accessibility and participation within all aspects of the school environment are reduced (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; 2011). Inclusive policy also ensures appropriate resources are in place for students’ learning and for staff members’ development as inclusive practitioners (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; 2011). Inclusive school policies in Australia are underpinned by international statements such as Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations (UN), 2006), as well as Australian national policies and statements such as the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration 2019 (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills, and Employment (DESE), 2019), Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021–2031 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021), Australian Student Wellbeing Framework 2018 (Education Council, 2018), Disability Standards for Education 2005 (DESE, 2005) and Disability Discrimination Act 1992. Within Australia, States and Territories also provide statements which inform school policy within their jurisdiction. For example, the Inclusive Education Statement in New South Wales advocates for inclusion as an important part of providing high quality educational opportunities for all students “where every student is known, valued and cared for and all students are learning to their fullest capability” (NSW DoE, 2021, p. 1).

Collectively, these encourage and/or require schools to address barriers to students’ fair and equitable access and participation in educational environments; affirm that every student has the right to a high-quality education free of discrimination in an environment that supports their safety and wellbeing; that positive, caring and respectful relationships with students, peers and teachers should be fostered; and that a culture of diversity is to be celebrated and valued. In order to effectively implement inclusive policy, schools need to foster an inclusive culture complemented by inclusive practice.

An inclusive culture is one in which diversity is embraced and all members are treated fairly, respectfully and equitably (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; 2011). Students should be enabled to feel that they belong within the educational community or classroom (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). Building an inclusive culture requires teachers to understand that any student can experience barriers to learning and participation, not only those considered to have ‘special educational needs’ (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; 2011). Labelling students based upon their perceived ability is often avoided, as are views that ability is fixed (Florian & Spratt, 2013), and high expectations are held for the learning potential of all students (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; 2011). An inclusive culture is also one in which teachers recognise their ability to facilitate learning and reduce barriers to learning and participation for all students in their classrooms (Booth & Ainscow, 2002, 2011; Florian & Spratt, 2013).

Inclusive practice means that learning and teaching activities are responsive to student diversity (Ainscow, 2020). That is, learning experiences are designed with students’ individual strengths and needs in mind, and consideration is given to the ways in which all students can be enabled to actively and meaningfully participate in their learning and be appropriately challenged (Ainscow, 2020; Booth & Ainscow, 2002; 2011). A strengths-based approach should be considered throughout this planning and implementation, meaning there should be a strong focus on students’ capabilities rather than ‘deficits’ (Florian & Spratt, 2013). Difference and diversity should be embraced and responded to positively (Finkelstein et al., 2021). Barriers to students’ learning and participation are identified and addressed (Dally et al., 2019), and the lessons learned from this are utilised to support the learning and participation of others (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; 2011). Assessment of student learning is designed to be receptive to and support the achievement of all students, and both collaborative and individual achievements are celebrated (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; 2011). Where teaching assistants (i.e., teachers’ aides or school learning support officers (SLSOs)) are present, they support all students in their learning and participation, not just students considered to have ‘special educational needs’, and through designing learning experiences to be responsive to all learners, the need for individual student support is reduced (Ainscow, 2020; Booth & Ainscow, 2002; 2011). When effectively implemented, inclusive education can benefit all students’ learning and achievement, positively impacting their self-esteem, and their emotional and social development (Antoninis et al., 2020).

Inclusive practice can be supported by approaches such as the Universal Design for Learning (UDL; see Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), 2018; Finkelstein et al., 2021) and differentiated instruction. A Universal Design for Learning is considered a proactive approach where responsiveness to student diversity is planned for from the outset regardless of students’ specific needs, whereas differentiated instruction is considered a reactive approach where learning experiences are varied or modified to cater to students’ specific needs (Lidner & Schwab, 2020). The UDL approach (CAST, 2018) involves providing multiple means for students to access and perceive information (e.g., displaying information in accessible and alternative modes), to engage in learning (e.g., providing opportunity for student choice within learning activities), and for communicating their learning (e.g., enabling various modes of expression). Differentiated instruction can involve modifying the learning environment, instruction, content, the processes through which students engage and learn the content, the product through which they communicate their learning.
assessment, and the timeframes (Lidner & Schwab, 2020). Student groupings can also be differentiated to support the learning of all students (Lidner & Schwab, 2020). Both UDL and differentiated instruction, when used effectively, can support fair and equitable educational experiences for all students.

Currently, in Australia, the Disability Standards for Education (DESE, 2005) underpins the personalised support and accommodation of students with disabilities in mainstream schools (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2020). Additionally, mainstream schools adopt an inclusive curriculum which offers equitable educational provision to students with disabilities and additional learning needs in comparison to their peers without additional needs. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2016). In line with these policy initiatives, the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) utilises a strengths-based approach in order to prompt schools to consider the individual needs of students who require additional support, whether physically, cognitively, behaviourally, socially, or emotionally. As a consequence, students with disabilities in Australian schools are expected to receive a socially-just and equitable education alongside their peers.

1.3. Challenges to inclusive practice

Conceptual understandings of inclusion differ across contexts which results in discrepancies in how it is translated into practice (Boyle & Anderson, 2020; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). In Australia, there is no single agreed definition of inclusive education (Dally et al., 2019), even within studies investigating teachers’ inclusive practices (Finkelstein et al., 2021). The implementation of ‘inclusive’ approaches does not always align with the core values of inclusion, and there can be inconsistencies at the level of the state, schools, and teachers (Boyle et al., 2011). For example, despite inclusion encompassing equitable education for all, it is often narrowly focused upon or conflated with students with impairment or ‘special educational needs’, whether in the literature or in practice (Ainscow, 2020; Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Woodcock & Hardy, 2017). The problem with this, as Antoninis et al. (2020, p. 104) argue, is that “inclusion cannot be achieved one group at a time”. Attention should be focused upon reducing the barriers to learning and participation which each student may encounter (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

For some teachers, their understanding of inclusion is reflective of this challenge. Woodcock and Hardy (2017) found that even for those teachers who believed inclusive education was an effective approach for teaching all students, a portion of teachers across various career stages when asked how they ‘define an inclusive classroom’ focused their attention predominantly upon special educational needs and differentiating instruction for students with this label. Rather than focusing on the learning of all students, such an approach may see students with a label being treated differently to those without (Florian & Spratt, 2013). Furthermore, when there is a narrow focus upon inclusion for students labelled with special educational needs, this can position ‘special educational needs’ as the cause of students’ difficulties, rather than on other factors which contribute to the barriers students may face in the learning environment (Booth & Ainscow, 2002, 2011; Florian & Spratt, 2013). This can also be the case when students’ race, language background, gender, or socioeconomic status see some teachers attribute students’ educational challenges to an inherent deficit or difficulty within the students (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018). A focus upon labels and a deficit view can lead teachers to hold lower expectations for these students’ potential (Florian & Spratt, 2013).

Misunderstanding of inclusion can also occur when it is considered that students need only be physically present or ‘integrated’ within a mainstream educational setting to be included effectively (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018; Woodcock & Hardy, 2017). As such, essential aspects of inclusion such as equitable participation and a feeling of belonging may be overlooked (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). Students may be present within the classroom but engaged only conditionally, such as being separated within the classroom to work with a teaching assistant (See, 2013). Differentiation of learning activities may also, if not conducted effectively and thoughtfully, unintentionally undermine students’ feelings of belonging and value, and subsequently, true inclusion (see Dixon et al., 2017). These form examples of microexclusion, where subtly, under the guise of inclusive practice, students in mainstream settings can experience exclusion (Faustino et al., 2018). The challenge and driving goal of inclusive practice is to identify, understand, and address exclusion, including instances of microexclusion (See, 2013).

Challenges can also arise when teachers may believe that additional support staff are required in order for students labelled with special educational needs to be effectively included in their classroom (Woodcock & Hardy, 2017). This may present a deficit view of students’ potential (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; 2011), which can undermine inclusion (Ainscow et al., 2019). It is important that teachers are supported to develop truly inclusive practices (Ainscow, 2020) and to believe in their capabilities to facilitate the learning of all students (Florian & Skaalvik, 2013). These inclusive practices include the capacity to modify and differentiate instruction to accommodate student diversity, and to set personalised goals which are appropriate to students’ individual profiles. To implement inclusive education, Dally et al. (2019) state that teachers require not only skills, knowledge, and inclusive attitudes, but the efficacy to effectively support and cater to student diversity.

Inclusion is much more than the placement of a previously marginalised student in a regular classroom. Inclusion requires educators to use innovative and inclusive teaching practices. Inclusive educators anticipate barriers that some students could face in their classrooms and use teaching practices to overcome barriers faced by their students (Sanger, 2020). They make learning as accessible, meaningful and welcoming to all students by employing approaches such as the Universal Design for Learning (Sanger, 2020).

1.4. Teacher self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a construct Bandura (1997, p. 3) described as an individual’s belief in their capability “to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments”. An individual’s self-efficacy in a particular domain can influence their goal setting, effort expenditure, and when faced with difficulties, their resilience and perseverance (Bandura, 1997; Pajares & Schunk, 2001), making self-efficacy a pertinent consideration in the teaching profession. Self-efficacy levels differ across domains of activity (Bandura, 1997) and teacher self-efficacy is the term for a teacher’s belief in their own capabilities to facilitate desired student outcomes such as learning and engagement (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) or their belief in their own capabilities to undertake the actions necessary to successfully complete a particular teaching task (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). It is a belief in competence that is oriented to future situations and considered to differ according to the context under consideration, such as the specific environment, the students being taught (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998), or subject being taught (e.g., maths, English or music; see Garvis, 2013). Teacher self-efficacy has been operationalised in various ways (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007) and in regard to pedagogy, for example, Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) have considered teacher self-efficacy as consisting of a teacher’s beliefs
in their capabilities in the areas of instructional strategies, classroom management and student engagement.

Teacher self-efficacy has been associated with positive outcomes for both teachers and students. Those with high teacher self-efficacy may experience greater job satisfaction (Zakarya, 2020), lower stress levels, and cope more effectively with challenging student behaviours (Zee & Koomen, 2016). A teacher’s belief in their teaching capabilities may also be predictive of their students’ motivation and positively associated with students’ achievement (Zee & Koomen, 2016). Furthermore, teacher self-efficacy has been positively associated with teachers’ instructional quality, such as classroom management strategies and the supportive climate of the classroom (Burić & Kim, 2020). As such, teacher self-efficacy may have implications for inclusive practice.

1.5. Inclusive practice and teacher self-efficacy

Teachers’ belief in their teaching capabilities may be associated with their attitudes towards inclusion and their employment of inclusive practices. For example, some studies (e.g., Savolainen et al., 2020; Woodcock & Jones, 2020; Özokcu, 2017) have found that teachers with higher teacher self-efficacy may hold more positive attitudes towards inclusive education and student diversity and have a lower likelihood of excluding students from their classroom. Furthermore, although there are some mixed findings, teachers with a higher teacher self-efficacy may have a lower likelihood of referring students to special educational placements (see Zee & Koomen, 2016). Teachers with higher teacher self-efficacy may also be more willing for students with disability to be included in mainstream schools, and more willing to teach these students within their own classroom (Savolainen et al., 2020). In regard to inclusive instructional approaches, some studies have found that more experienced teachers with high self-efficacy may more frequently use differentiated instruction, adjust goals to cater for students’ needs, and may be more positive towards implementing these strategies (see Zee & Koomen, 2016). In an Australian study, Sharma and Sokal (2016) examined the relationship between in-service teachers’ use of inclusive practices and their teaching efficacy. They found that teachers with a high sense of teaching efficacy employed more inclusive practices (Sharma & Sokal, 2016). In a recent study, Sharma et al. (2021) examined relationships between 390 pre-service educators selected from Australia, India, Canada, and Hong Kong with their attitudes, self-efficacy beliefs, and the use of inclusive practices using a newly developed Inclusive Practices Scale. They found teaching efficacy beliefs were the strongest predictors of participants’ use of inclusive practices.

Teachers’ self-efficacy has also predicted their reported inclusive behaviours towards students with intellectual disabilities, which included modifying curricular content, resources and the pace of instruction (Wilson et al., 2016). Wilson and colleagues suggest that without these self-efficacy beliefs, the requisite effort to perform inclusive behaviours may not be exerted, as self-efficacy beliefs draw on both teachers’ motivation and ability for inclusive practice. Overall, Savolainen et al. (2020) argue that there is a current scarcity of empirical evidence which explores the relationship between teacher self-efficacy and teachers’ inclusive practices within their classroom. However, studies such as those above convey that self-efficacy beliefs may have an important role to play in the practice of an inclusive educational approach.

Whether all students are receiving a high-quality education when they are within ‘inclusive’ classrooms requires further investigation (Sharma & Sokal, 2016), and examining teachers’ self-efficacy and the way in which it relates to their reported inclusive classroom practices may provide insight into this. Furthermore, as increases in teachers’ self-efficacy are suggested to aid the development of positive teacher attitudes towards inclusion (Savolainen et al., 2020) and their willingness to employ inclusive practice (Wilson et al., 2016), understanding how teacher self-efficacy may relate to inclusive practices would be valuable and timely. This study therefore examined teachers’ level of teacher self-efficacy and the ways in which their classroom practices are inclusive.

1.6. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore how all students are accommodated within mainstream settings, through an examination of self-efficacy beliefs. Additionally, the study also sought to identify specific strategies that are employed to facilitate inclusion, based on these beliefs.

2. Methodological approach

2.1. Method

Data were drawn from individual semi-structured interviews with each teacher at a time of the school and principal’s choosing. A replacement teacher covered each teacher’s time in class. All data that the interviewees provided were anonymised. The semi-structured interviews were approximately an hour in length and included a total of eight questions around inclusive education. The overall aim of the interviews was to investigate the teachers’ understanding of inclusive education and ways in which they are inclusive. For the purpose of this study, responses to one key question (reported below) were analysed.

- How are all students included and accommodated in your classroom, and what are some of the strategies that are employed to facilitate this inclusion?

Each participant also responded to several questionnaires including a demographic questionnaire and Tschanen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy’s teacher self-efficacy scale (TSES). The TSES consists of 12 statements regarding teachers’ beliefs about their capability to effectively instruct, engage, and manage students in their classroom. Some sample items were phrases as follows: “to what extent can you provide an alternative explanation or example when students are confused?”, “how much can you do to motivate students who show low interest in school work?”, and “how much can you do to control disruptive behaviour in the classroom?”. The TSES included a Likert-scale response from 1 (none at all) to 9 (a great deal). The higher each respondent scored, the higher their teacher self-efficacy. The statements were loaded onto one factor (teacher self-efficacy) with a (Cronbach’s alpha) reliability of 0.883. The level of teacher self-efficacy scores from all 140 participants ranged from 6.50 to 9 (M = 7.51). The selection of participants with a cut-off score within the highest 85th percentile (Mean score of 8.50; z = 1.342) and lowest 15th percentile (Mean score of 5.65; z = -1.370) were selected for the study.

Methodologically, the research involved analysing teachers’ responses to what their inclusive classroom looks like, including examples to demonstrate their responses. Drawing upon Miles et al. (2019), a thematic analysis approach was conducted for data coding across multiple cycles, making connections and themes between different parts of the data. This included in relation to the earlier theorising and literature pertaining to inclusive education and teacher self-efficacy. This enabled a recursive analytical approach between the data and various indicators of teacher self-efficacy as these pertained to inclusive education. Two of the authors analysed the data separately, debriefed on the initial analysis.
and then completed a second iteration of analysis. This led to the identification of three broad categories of teachers’ inclusive classrooms from teachers identified as having high or low levels of teacher self-efficacy:

a) ‘Philosophical inclusive education understandings’
b) ‘Broad inclusive education practices’
c) ‘Specific inclusive education practices’

‘Philosophical inclusive education understandings’ captured teachers’ statements which related to philosophical aspects of the inclusive nature of their classroom, such as the classroom being enjoyable, safe, and engaging for all. ‘Broad inclusive education practices’ related to teachers’ broad strategies for including and accommodating students in their classroom, such as ensuring all students can participate in learning. ‘Specific inclusive education practices’ encapsulated teachers’ more specific strategies which illustrated how students were included and accommodated in their classroom, such as differentiating questioning to cater to individual needs.

Second cycle coding then involved identifying key themes/patterns within each of these initial categories of high and low efficacy teachers’ inclusive classroom environments. Furthermore, this process revealed several themes within each category of inclusive classrooms that teachers reported, which are included in the results below.

2.2. Participants

This research study is part of a larger project which interviewed 140 primary (elementary) school teachers across rural, regional, and urban schools, in New South Wales, Australia. Schools were randomly selected within each area representing a range of various characteristics including the size of the school (ranging from 35 to 750 students within the schools), socioeconomic status (low to wealthy), and ethnicity (all white to predominantly multiracial and/or indigenous). This part of the study draws upon those teachers with the highest level of teacher self-efficacy (n = 21) and those with the lowest level of teacher self-efficacy (n = 20) resulting in 41 primary school teachers. The method used to classify teachers into two categories is described below. As can be seen in Table 1, there was a difference in mean age and teaching experience between teachers with a high and low level of teacher self-efficacy. Those with a higher level of teacher self-efficacy were slightly older and had more experience that those with a lower level of teacher self-efficacy. Moreover, there was a greater divide of teacher self-efficacy between teachers in regional schools than rural schools.

2.3. Procedure

All relevant institutional and education departmental ethical approvals were gained. Once approved schools were randomly selected, principals were approached and invited to participate in the study. Once principals approved participation in the study, one of the research team members organised a time with each principal to carry out the semi-structured interviews with relevant teachers who approved participation. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

3. Findings

The following findings emerged from an analysis of the data yielded through the interviews. Participant responses were loosely divided into those categorised as “High efficacious” and “Low efficacious”. Both categories of teachers indicated strengths in the inclusive classroom, with quotations from each group suggesting that they aspired to accommodate students using an appreciative lens.

3.1. High efficacious teachers

Three major themes emerged which showed the strategies employed by high efficacious teachers were remarkably different from those with low efficacy.

‘Philosophical inclusive education understandings’

High efficacious teachers would make their classroom an enjoyable, safe and engaging classroom for all students.

Several teachers responded by stating that it is important that their classroom is a fun, happy, and enjoyable classroom:

“looks like fun … everyone looks like they are having fun”. (Jack)

“Engagement, happy, growth mindset”. (Sarah)

High efficacious teachers also made the point that it was important for their classroom to be a safe classroom for all students:

“knowing that [the classroom is] safe and that any effort [made] is seen as a good effort”. (Andrew)

Other teachers in this category, acknowledged that positivity was also important in order to create a safe learning context:

“Always try to be positive … so that everyone feels [safe]”. (Penelope)

Many high efficacious teachers made it clear how important it is to make sure that the classroom is an engaging classroom where all students are involved. One participant reflected that inclusive settings are likely to prompt engagement:

“kids will be all engaged”. (Matthew)

Another participant viewed engagement in line with agency, noting that:

“everyone gets a say, really”. (Nicola)

Additionally, cooperation and collaboration appeared to be necessary for authentic engagement among highly efficacious teachers:

“So, I’m very much about we’re in it together, we’re a team”. (Clare)

‘Broad inclusive education practices’

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive Details</th>
<th>High efficacious teachers</th>
<th>Low efficacious teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age</td>
<td>36.5 years</td>
<td>31 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender distribution</td>
<td>1 male/20 female</td>
<td>5 male/15 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years’ experience</td>
<td>18.1 years</td>
<td>9.7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School location</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural (n = 40)</td>
<td>2.5% (n = 1)</td>
<td>2.5% (n = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional (n = 44)</td>
<td>27% (n = 12)</td>
<td>27% (n = 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban (n = 56)</td>
<td>14% (n = 8)</td>
<td>13% (n = 7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
High efficacious teachers would make sure that they would focus the classroom lessons around student success, building students’ confidence, personalised learning goals, and making sure that the learning is specific to each student and accessible for everyone in the class.

One teacher made sure that all students have the belief that they have the ability to have a go:

“Inclusion in my classroom looks like everyone has the ability to have a go”. (Andrew)

Another teacher made sure that all students succeed every day in the class activities:

“I hope they all succeed every day”. (Jack)

High efficacious teachers aimed to build on their students’ strengths and increase self-confidence within their classrooms:

“building that self-confidence”. (Andrew)

“I know every single student. I know exactly what their strengths are. I know what their weaknesses are”. (Matilda)

Another noted that increased self-confidence among students in an inclusive setting meant that they need to:

“create champions within the room”. (Paul)

There was a focus around making sure that the learning goals are individualised to meet the students’ needs:

“Everyone has their own individual learning goals”. (Matilda).

Another participant acknowledged the need for personalised learning goals:

“They have personal learning goals so that they know what they’re achieving”. (Christine)

This was corroborated by another participant, who underlined the need for goals to be linked to personal growth:

“every child has individual learning goals and they are aware of those and that they can strive for that for their own personal growth”. (Sam)

Teachers with a higher level of teacher self-efficacy often mentioned that they would make sure that the learning is specific towards each student’s needs:

“can look quite different for different people”. (Liz)

Additionally, one respondent linked needs to the responsivity of students:

“In my classroom, it’d be looking at the needs and the responsiveness of the students to the certain areas and the tasks that are set up”. (Darcy)

Student needs were highlighted as central to highly efficacious teachers:

“specific needs of that person”. (Beryl)

Some high efficacious teachers stated the importance of their classroom being accessible for all students. Some examples of this were through the curriculum, accommodation, and making the learning relevant for the students:

“access the curriculum [for all]”. (Steven)

Adapting the curriculum was viewed as essential to another participant, who noted that:

“into learning how to accommodate”. (Stacy)

Additionally, curricular modifications were appropriate to:

“drawing the kids in depending on what their background is”. (Sam)

‘Specific inclusive education practices’

High efficacious teachers focused on strategies towards students’ own goals and student self-monitored learning within the classroom:

“you would see goals on the walls, where children are allowed to sign off”. (Kim)

Allowing students to assume responsibility and ownership for their learning was fundamental to some teachers and this attribute differentiated them from low efficacy teachers. For example, one teacher stated:

“I encourage children to really regulate their own learning and take responsibility for their own learning”. (Kim)

Additionally, engagement in each other’s learning was a central feature in some classrooms, as observed by one participant:

“You’ll see a lot of self-assessment and peer assessment. They’re engaged in each other’s learning. They’re engaged and assessing each other’s learning, as well as their own learning”. (Sarah)

Over half of the high efficacious teachers also referred to using a lot of differentiated pedagogical strategies:

“Everything that I do in my classroom in terms of teaching is differentiated”. (Stacy)

One participant observed the essential need for differentiation in:

“the actual questioning at the end is differentiated”. (Matilda)

Another commented that authentic differentiation involved an awareness of individual student needs:

“inclusion is you rely heavily on differentiation, because not only are you differentiating the curriculum, you’re differentiating the needs of the students, you’re differentiating the students’ ability and capabilities of performing the tasks”. (Darcy)

They would also use mixed and flexible approaches within their classroom:
“You’d see mixed groups working together ... Sometimes they'll be in mixed ability, mixed gender groups. It depends on the purpose of the lesson and the outcome that I want.” (Michaela)

Flexible grouping was highlighted as a key feature of inclusive classrooms, by another participant:

“The groups change. I change them around every four weeks”. (Clare)

Another acknowledged that collaboration was important:

“We're doing a lot of collaboration”. (Terry)

Teachers’ approaches would also consider more inclusive approaches that would involve all students through strategies that are relevant, interesting and cooperative:

“And then that's when we do all that cooperative learning”. (Clare)

One participant observed that there was a need to create equity when it came to offering responses in the inclusive setting:

“everyone gets a turn. Also try to make sure that everyone gets a turn so always make sure that I'm picking different people and not always picking the people that had their hands up”. (Penelope)

Added to this, another participant maintained that it was necessary to identify areas that students were interested in, allowing for greater levels of success:

“They might have other areas they’re interested in, and if you’re not providing that for them, then that's not giving them that opportunity to feel success”. (Paul)

3.2. Low efficacious teachers

‘Philosophical inclusive education understandings’

Despite conceding lower efficacy levels, teachers in this category created classrooms which are welcoming, safe, and respectful:

Several teachers responded by stating that it is important that their classroom is a welcoming classroom where everyone feels that they belong:

“Making sure that when they walk into the classroom every morning that they all feel welcome in the classroom, that they all feel like that’s where they belong”. (Nikita)

Additionally, ensuring that all students feel accepted was an important aspect in most classrooms, as observed in this comment:

“making sure that everyone does feel welcome within my classroom”. (Carl)

One teacher stated the importance of making sure that the classroom is a safe place for students:

“a safe place for them to be”. (Nikita)

Several teachers mentioned the importance of making sure that their students are respectful of one another and accepting of each other:

“I think I create good rapport with my students so that mutual respect between them”. (Carly)

In this context, another reflected on the need for mutual respect:

“showing the same level of respect for all students”. (Julia)

Similarly, the acceptance of differences and the knowledge of varied needs, were embedded into this educator's comments.

“accepting of differences, probably, and knowing that different kids learn differently and yes just are different, have different needs”. (Eric)

‘Broad inclusive education practices’

Low efficacious teachers focused primarily on behaviour management within their classroom. They also reported consideration towards categorising students as well as making sure that all students are included within classroom tasks.

Low efficacious teachers ensured that students' behaviour is kept under control:

“We did have a behaviour chart”. (Courtney)

Another participant conceded that they utilised behaviour management systems to reward socially appropriate behaviours:

“I would have a class behaviour management like Class Dojos in there and really give positive feedback to everyone”. (Ada)

One participant admitted to managing student behaviour without having much prior knowledge of how to do this:

“I've had to deal with some of these behaviours and not having that background knowledge”. (Nikita)

These teachers also categorised students according to various differences. Although these differences were acknowledged and categorised, it was evident that these participants considered what students could do through an appreciative lens:

“doesn't matter if there are students who are a little bit different, I'll just try and just find that special little something in each student”. (Ada)

Another participant was aware that teacher perceptions are influenced by student demographics, noting that:

“we also look at children from different backgrounds, not just cultural backgrounds but, you know, more affluent backgrounds and the ones that are, you know, low socioeconomic”. (Donna)

Furthermore, the development of procedures to manage students with medical needs was noted as a challenge, as articulated by this participant:

“I've got some medical needs in my room as well, so just developing procedures where the child brings in the medication that they need and the child is aware of where they need to put
it and what they need to do with it and bringing it in and carrying it in the playground and those types of things". (Wilma)

An important aspect to teachers of a low efficacious level was ensuring that all students are included within classroom tasks:
“kids having a go and feeling brave enough to be able to do that without consequence or embarrassment”. (Mary)

Another adopted a more philosophical understanding to ensure equitable participation:
“I think that inclusion in my classroom looks like every child being able to participate in the tasks”. (Nikita)

Moreover, access was noted as an essential feature of the inclusive setting with one participant adding that:
“students are able to access the same curriculum, but in different ways to include themselves”. (Carly)

‘Specific inclusive education practices’

Teachers of a low efficacious level considered the main pedagogical practices to be based around students’ ability levels, individualising tasks, behaviour management, differentiating practices, categorising students amongst students, and using assistance within the classroom activities.

Low efficacious teachers tended to group students in accordance with students’ ability levels:
“sometimes it will be ability-based groups”. (James)

Grouping students was often applied with the intention of targeting student needs:
“During reading lessons … students read in ability-based groups and then we work on the word, work at their level". (Kelly)

Some teachers also mentioned giving different tasks depending on students’ ability levels:
“similar tasks, but set at different levels basically”. (James)

Targeting student needs reinforced grouping into ability levels in these classrooms:
“[our differing maths groups are] just based on student needs”. (Kelly)

Some teachers preferred the structure of ability groupings, in order to better accommodate student needs:
“My lower students will be using more hands-on things, or we might go through more examples kind of thing. And then my higher students: I can then do more extension stuff and deeper problem solving". (Carly)

Teachers with a low efficacious level stated that they use strategies where tasks are individualised:
“you’ve got different activities set up, and students can self-regulate”. (Mandy)

Another participant added that individualised support was fundamental to their initiatives to include all students:
“we also do a reading program, so that’s very individualised where students, it’s pretty much one-on-one”. (Wilma)

While another participant reinforced that each activity was examined with regard to its capacity to individualise:
“each activity's individualised". (Wilma)

Tasks around managing behaviour, from misbehaviours to modelling and praising positive behaviour, tend to be a key focus with low efficacious teachers:
“task cards where [students] they have to do a certain amount of tasks and then rip them off and then they can have a break or do something that they enjoy”. (Eric)

Stipulating rules, and demonstrating care with the way our individuals speak to one another was a feature of another participant’s comments:
“we have our rules obviously and the way that they speak to each other". (Courtney)

Additionally, the need to utilise positive behaviour support and model good behaviour was fundamental to the modus operandi of this educator’s classroom:
“positive reinforcement and modelling good [behaviour]". (Sandy)

Differentiated practices were also mentioned by some low efficacious teachers:
“differentiation of activities, making sure that it’s accessible for all of them”. (Nikita)

The use of varied workstations to facilitate differentiation was noted by another educator:
“we have workstations, which are all differentiated". (Kelly)

Teaching strategies that focused on categorising students was also an important consideration when explaining inclusive practices for these low efficacious teachers:
“So medical. I had a girl with diabetes. She was pretty good, she just went and tested but I guess allowing her just to get up out of her chair and just go on doing that, I guess it was kind of inclusion as well isn’t it”. (Eric)

One educator referenced her awareness of cultural differences, and illustrated how she incorporated this into her daily routines:
“we said Happy Ramadan to the two girls in my class and I think we understand about each other’s culture". (Lisa)

Another reported on how visual cues were built into student activities, such as the use of technology to assist with timetabling:
“We also have visuals. We also use the iPads for timetables for those students with diagnoses that need to know what’s
Underpinning broad inclusive education practices, and specifically differed significantly from their counterparts with lower efficacy. These themes included teachers’ philosophical inclusive education understandings, broad inclusive education practices, and specific inclusive education practices.

Highly efficacious teachers utilised strategies to embrace philosophical inclusive education incorporating enjoyment, safety and engagement. Low efficacious teachers used similar approaches, including safety, respect and rapport in the classroom as important. Broad inclusive education practices led by highly efficacious teachers focused on student success, accessibility and building confidence. Learning goals set by highly efficacious teachers were specific to student profiles, with appropriate curriculum modification being implemented to support individual learners. Teachers with a lower self-efficacy reported on implementing inclusive practices often focusing on behaviour management strategies, and regularly viewing the differences among students.

More specific inclusive education practices reported by higher efficacious teachers developed lessons around student-led goals, encouraging self-monitoring and self-regulation among students. Differentiated instruction and flexibility were commonplace in these settings, with intentional efforts being made to involve all students, through relevant and cooperative learning strategies. However, teachers with lower self-efficacy tended to focus on student ability, categorising students and individualised instruction. Students of similar abilities were often grouped together to allow for targeted instruction. Most tasks set by teachers with lower self-efficacy were oriented to produce pro-social behaviours. Furthermore, teachers relied on support from paraprofessional staff more frequently. Ultimately, there was some commonality among the two groups of teachers with regard to understanding of inclusion, however, teaching strategies appeared to differ quite markedly.

4. Discussion

This study explored teachers’ self-reported inclusive practices, comparing the approaches of teachers with the highest and lowest levels of teacher self-efficacy from a sample of primary school teachers. In explaining what inclusion in their classroom looks like, both high and low efficacious teachers demonstrated similar philosophical inclusive education understandings. However, key differences arose between high and low efficacious teachers in the examples that they provided in terms of classroom practices that they used to include all learners within their classroom. The nature of the strategies that high efficacy teachers employed differed substantially from low efficacy teachers. This study contributes valuable insights which add to the scarcity of empirical evidence exploring relationships between teacher self-efficacy and inclusive practice (see Savolainen et al., 2020). It illustrates, through self-reporting of participants in this study, that teacher self-efficacy may play a role in how teachers apply their philosophical understanding of inclusion to their practice. We do not claim that there is a causal relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and use of inclusive practices but clearly there is close association between these two variables. How self-efficacy beliefs translate into the use of inclusive teaching practices need further in-depth exploration.

Both groups of teachers reported similar philosophical inclusive education understandings. While low efficacious teachers focused on the welcoming, respectful, safe and accepting classroom environment, high efficacious teachers focused on the classroom environment being a fun, happy, safe and engaging space. As such, high and low efficacious teachers similarly understand the philosophical underpinnings of inclusive educational classroom environments, echoing the values of inclusion expressed by many recent writers (e.g. Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018) and official documents such as the Inclusive Education Statement (NSW DoE, 2021). Many of the philosophical points discussed by high efficacious teachers were consistent with what other researchers have found (e.g. Booth & Ainscow, 2002, 2011; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018), where the classroom environment is fun, happy, safe, and engaging. Furthermore, many of the philosophical points discussed by low efficacious teachers were similar to the ones highlighted by the high efficacious teachers in that the classroom environment is welcoming, safe, respectful, and accepting.

In relation to the inclusive educational practices occurring within teachers’ classrooms, there was a clear distinction between the approaches of teachers with high and low teacher self-efficacy. The broad inclusive practices that the high efficacious teachers stated included the beliefs that all students can succeed, using a strengths-based approach as well as personalised learning goals. The practices used by these teachers demonstrated that they make attempts to address the needs of those students who need additional support. However, they do not do this at the expense of the needs of other students. They view all students requiring adjustments to learn effectively but they understand that some students would need significant adjustments to succeed while others may need minimal adjustments. Furthermore, the teachers in this group also focused on practices that met the specific needs of students and were making sure that all students had access to the learning. These findings support Florian and Spratt (2013), as well as Zee and Koomen (2016), in that these approaches help to build students’ confidence and focus on making the level of tasks appropriately challenging for students. In comparison, the broad inclusive practices that the low efficacious teachers stated were somewhat different to the ones highlighted by the high efficacious teachers. The low efficacious teachers focused on broad behaviour management approaches, categorisation of students (focusing on student differences), and approaches that are accessible for all students. Categorising students by using labels and focusing on the differences between students can illustrate a ‘deficit’ approach (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018), and focus may be drawn away from the barriers present within the learning environment which contribute to the challenges students may be facing (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Whilst both high and low efficacious teachers recognised the importance of inclusion for all, high efficacious teachers predominantly discussed individualising learning for everyone, and low efficacious
teachers more often discussed individualising learning for students based upon ability, behaviour or other 'special educational needs'.

The more specific inclusive education practices that the higher efficacious teachers used focused on students self-monitoring their own learning, giving them more responsibility to set their own goals, as well as a focus on differentiated practices. Furthermore, groupings of students through mixed ability and flexible approaches, as well as the use of cooperative tasks, were often referred to. Many of these approaches (when applied appropriately) can be effective and represent the philosophical view of inclusive education (Lidner & Schwab, 2020) which the high efficacious teachers mentioned. In comparison, the more specific inclusive practices that the low efficacious teachers used focused on a different approach to inclusive education than their higher efficacious counterparts. These included practices such as managing behaviour, focusing on labels and categories of students, and the consideration of having support in the classroom. Managing student behaviour is a broader aspect of classroom practice and requires teachers to develop competence and self-efficacy beliefs more specifically with regard to student behaviour. Moreover, approaches such as the ability grouping of students, and differentiating and individualising tasks predominantly based upon perceived ability, may not necessarily be catering to all students’ needs in an inclusive manner (Antonisnis et al., 2020; Florian & Spratt, 2013); it is essential these are managed sensitively to avoid microexclusions occurring.

Overall, high efficacious teachers conveyed that classroom lessons were focused around student success and building students’ confidence, potentially reflecting a strengths-based approach (Florian & Spratt, 2013) and high expectations for the personal potential of all learners (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). In addition, there was a strong focus on individualising learning goals and tailoring learning experiences to be responsive to students’ needs, supporting findings of previous studies (see Zee & Koomen, 2016) and illustrating teachers’ consideration of how they can enable students to be appropriately challenged and to actively and meaningfully participate in their learning (Ainscow, 2020; Booth and Ainscow, 2011). Student self-monitoring and self-regulation was encouraged, reflecting that teachers were considering ways in which to foster student agency and self-determination (see NSW DoE, 2021). Regarding specific strategies, over half of high efficacious teachers reported using evidence-based practices, such as differentiated instruction, modifying aspects of the learning experience in order to cater to students’ needs (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). This supports the findings of Wilson et al. (2016) who also suggested that self-efficacy beliefs may be crucial to teachers expending the necessary effort to implement inclusive practices. The high efficacious teachers in the current study also used mixed and flexible approaches including mixed groupings of students and cooperative learning experiences intended to be relevant, interesting, and to foster the involvement of all students. When used effectively, these differentiated strategies can support students’ equitable participation (Lidner & Schwab, 2020).

In contrast, within reports of low efficacious teachers’ classroom practices, low efficacious teachers had a strong focus upon managing behaviour and they tended to categorise students according to various differences such as disability, chronic health conditions, or sociocultural backgrounds. Furthermore, examples of their inclusive practices were predominantly based around students’ ability levels, such as grouping students or providing different tasks based upon perceived ability. Narrowly focusing inclusive actions upon students with particular labels may pose a potential challenge to inclusion for a number of reasons. When narrowly focusing inclusive education upon labels (e.g., impairment or disability), teachers may attribute challenges students face within the learning environment to a ‘deficit’ within the student (Ainscow & Messiah, 2018). This may prevent teachers from recognising and addressing barriers to learning and participation, and the ways in which they can foster student success. Together these can lower teachers’ expectations of student achievement (Florian & Spratt, 2013) and undermine the inclusive culture of the environment (see Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Rather than teachers recognising that all students have learning strengths and needs, and that each student may encounter barriers to learning and participation, it may eventuate that students with a label are treated differently to those without, and each student’s learning needs are not equitably or effectively catered to in an inclusive manner (Antonisnis et al., 2020; Florian & Spratt, 2013). Nevertheless, low efficacious teachers reported a focus upon making sure all students were included within classroom tasks.

In addition, teachers with low teacher self-efficacy focused upon the use of teaching assistants (i.e., teachers’ aides or school learning support officers (LSOS)) to cater for the needs of specific students within their classes. Whilst an inclusive approach would see teaching assistants supporting all students in their learning (Ainscow, 2020; Booth and Ainscow, 2011), when supporting only specific students within the classroom there can be unintended opportunities for microexclusion to occur. For example, students may be present within the classroom yet somewhat separated from full engagement in the learning activities and/or their peers by working with the teaching assistant (Slee, 2013). Interestingly, teaching assistants were not referred to by any of the high efficacious teachers. Low efficacious teachers’ focus on having additional support staff to enable inclusion may present a deficit view of student potential (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), and importantly, also point to the need for teachers to be supported in order to inclusively cater to student diversity (Dally et al., 2019; Florian & Spratt, 2013). Fundamentally, the results from the study also illuminated the differences in practice between highly efficacious teachers and those with lower self-efficacy relating to inclusivity. For the current study, inclusivity involves the embracing of more personalised instruction, suited to learner profiles.

4.1. Implications

This study indicated that all teachers tended to understand the concept and value of inclusive education. However, the way in which this was applied to practice within the classroom is where differences arose, and those teachers who did not have the belief in their teaching capabilities at times reported employing strategies which may pose challenges to inclusion for all and possibly present opportunities for microexclusion within the classroom to occur. Should this be the case, it suggests that some students may be missing out on the many benefits of a truly inclusive education. This would be an unfortunate conclusion as evidence suggests that when students experience inclusive education, it can benefit their learning, achievement, self-esteem, and social and emotional development (Antonisnis et al., 2020). Future studies may examine whether the strong focus specifically upon inclusion for students with special educational needs within inclusive policy and literature, is unintentionally narrowing the focus of low efficacious teachers’ inclusive classroom practices and detracting attention from those practices which promote inclusion for all.

The findings of this study illustrate that informing teachers about inclusion (e.g., through workshops about what inclusive education is) may not be enough for all teachers to confidently and effectively teach inclusively. It appears likely that for teachers to effectively enact inclusion within their classroom, they need to be supported in how they can actually apply the concept of inclusive education to practice so their belief in their capabilities to teach...
with inclusive classrooms is fostered and bolstered. Future studies may explore the potential ways in which this may be facilitated. Furthermore, future studies may shed light on whether increases in a teacher’s understanding of how to practice inclusion results in changes to teacher self-efficacy over time, and whether similar relationships between teacher self-efficacy and inclusive practice are evident in secondary school teacher and preschool teacher populations. Theoretically, in regard to Bandura’s (1997) paradigm regarding self-efficacy beliefs relating to inclusionary practices, the study acknowledges that teachers who perceive themselves as highly efficacious are likely to embrace their roles as inclusive educators with greater resilience and examine ways of overcoming challenges in this context. Furthermore, high self-efficacy beliefs are fundamental to teaching as teachers are likely to position themselves more accurately due to their confidence in their ability to accommodate all students.

4.2. Limitations

The findings of this study are based on participant self-reports and should be interpreted within this context. Whilst social desirability may have influenced teachers’ responses, this does not appear to have limited the findings of this study in any significant way as a clear distinction in the approach to inclusivity of teachers’ reported classroom strategies was clearly evident between the high and low teacher self-efficacy groups. Nevertheless, examination of how well teachers’ reports of practice align with observations of teachers’ classroom practice may provide further insight. Additionally, while we acknowledge that self-efficacy beliefs may be measured utilising quantitative tools, these may offer limited perceptions relating to teacher self-efficacy beliefs and inclusive practice. Further research in the field is required which distinguishes teacher practice conceptually, into instruction, engagement and behaviour management. This would offer more targeted insight into how high and low self-efficacy beliefs relating to inclusive education may be more accurately interpreted.

5. Conclusion

This study of the teacher self-efficacy and inclusive practices of primary school teachers illustrates that for inclusion to be enacted effectively within our schools, teachers may require support which goes beyond simply informing them of what inclusion is. Whilst both high and low efficacious teachers held a similar understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of inclusive education, there were clear differences in how they translated these into practice. Teachers with a higher belief in their teaching capabilities reported employing strategies which were flexible, responsive to students’ strengths and needs, focused on student success, and encouraging of students’ own self-regulation. However, teachers with a lower belief in their teaching capabilities focused their classroom strategies such as grouping students or differentiating tasks predominantly around their students’ ability. Furthermore, they focused upon managing student behaviour, and unlike high efficacious teachers, reported the use of teaching assistants to aid in catering to students’ needs. A question that remained unanswered is, “why do differences in the practices of high and low efficacy teachers exist?” Is it because of the pre-service and in-service training of participants or is it due to their personal attributes? Or is it due to some other factors? More research is needed to answer these questions. Irrespective of what we will find about these questions, it is fairly evident from this study that we need to find ways to enhance the efficacy of our educators so that all our students have access to the high quality inclusive practices they deserve.

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