

## Self-Efficacy and the Inclusive Teacher

Joshua Abraham

### Abstract

*The success of inclusive education is dependent on the self-efficacy of classroom teachers. This research examines the different ways in which teachers shape their confidence when providing equal opportunity for all students. For teachers to successfully implement inclusive practices within the classroom, they must first believe in the right for education for all students and understand the legislations surrounding inclusive education. Teachers must also continue to grow their knowledge through participation in Professional Development that is supported by collaborated Professional Learning Communities within the school. In order for teachers to continue to adapt their practice to suit the needs of their students, school leaders are responsible for developing a culture of inclusion and providing opportunities for collective growth among all educators within the system.*

In most countries around the world, schools are a place where students, regardless of culture, gender, language, and ability, are entitled to the opportunity of equal education (Chao et al., 2017). The end goal of inclusive education is to provide every child with the chance to flourish in a safe learning environment, as well as within society (Nishan, 2018). Teachers play a central role in the implementation of inclusive education (Chao et al., 2016); seeing themselves as capable educators will guide inclusive philosophy (Specht et al., 2015). In order to strengthen teacher this self-efficacy, teachers must believe in the culture of inclusion (Nishan, 2018), and learn about local legislation and policies of inclusion (Chao et al., 2016). While the attitudes and beliefs of inclusion are an important starting point for educators, pre-teacher training provides teachers with the knowledge of differentiating instruction and experience working with alongside students with exceptional needs (Friesen & Cuning, 2018). School leaders are essential in establishing a culture of inclusion while supporting educator's needs for inclusive practices (Jung et al., 2019) by providing sustainable professional development and building collaborative professional learning communities (PLCs).

### Teacher Beliefs and Attitudes

The beliefs and attitudes that teachers hold toward inclusive education are foremost in understanding the importance of providing equal opportunity for all students. Positive attitudes toward inclusion are important in the successful implementation of inclusive practices and creating a positive learning environment for all students (Sannen et al., 2020). Individual attitudes and beliefs vary from teacher to teacher and are influenced by factors such as personal experiences, culture, exposure, and local policy and legislation (Peček & Macura-Milovanović, 2019). Since culture can play a role in one's belief of inclusion (Steen & Wilson, 2020), increased knowledge and understanding of local law and legislation is found to increase self-efficacy (Chao, 2017). When pre-service teachers are given a chance to evaluate their own skills with regards to inclusive education that is consistent with local law and legislation, the effect is greater than learning teacher skills alone. Teacher beliefs and attitudes toward inclusive education are significant factors that relate to the success of inclusive education, and these attitudes and understanding of local legislation are generally formed during teacher training courses (Chao et al., 2016). It is important that educational institutions, such as universities and teacher colleges, continue to inspire positive beliefs and attitudes toward inclusivity, but also provide teacher candidates with ample exposure to diverse classroom settings.

## **Pre-Service Training**

Pre-service training has a positive influence on teachers' attitudes of inclusive education and improves teacher self-efficacy for inclusive practices (Chao et al., 2017). In order for pre-service teachers to be confident entering diverse classroom settings, it is imperative that educational institutions, such as universities and teacher colleges, offer specific training that provides teachers with the skills and experiences they require to feel successful in implementing inclusive teaching practices (Specht et al., 2015). Pre-service teachers who are offered more extensive programming to understand behaviour management and other inclusive practices enter mainstream schools with more inclusive beliefs and positive self-efficacy. Pre-service teachers engaged in courses that are specific to inclusive education report a higher level of confidence than other pre-service teachers who do not engage in such specialized courses (Chao et al., 2017). Teachers will, therefore, advocate for the importance of educating all students when entering mainstream classrooms. My current role as resource teacher provides me with the opportunity to collaborate with first-year teachers. An issue that is continuously mentioned by teachers is the lack of preparedness experienced when first exposed to a diverse classroom, particularly students with exceptional needs. It is, therefore, crucial that educational institutions, such as universities and teacher colleges, offer pre-service teachers sufficient opportunity to engage in practical experiences working with students with exceptional needs (Kiel et al., 2019). Along with teachers requiring the opportunity to expose themselves with a range of student profiles, they will also require training and feedback in adapting curriculum and instruction to meet the learning needs of all students.

For teachers to be successful within the classroom, educators must understand and engage in differentiated instruction that will enable them to support the needs of all students (Friesen & Cuning, 2018). Teacher self-efficacy includes the belief in one's ability to adopt innovative teaching strategies that are required to handle the range of learning profiles within the classroom (Keil et al., 2019). Beginning teachers typically experience low self-efficacy when it comes to adapting curriculum for all students in their classroom (De Neve & Devos, 2015). Educational institutions must provide pre-service teachers explicit instruction for the implementation of differentiated teaching approaches, and opportunity for these teachers to implement these strategies in a practical environment (Wan, 2015). It is important to realize that, since self-efficacy is based on personal and cultural beliefs, teachers require guidance when adapting curriculum for marginalized and minority groups, such as LGBTQIA+ groups (Taylor et al., 2015). With classrooms more diverse than ever, it is necessary that educational institutions provide pre-service teachers with the knowledge and skills that they need to differentiate instruction for their diverse classrooms (Specht et al., 2015), in order to develop self-efficacy. As educational institutions shape the self-efficacy of new teachers, it is the beliefs and attitudes of the leaders within schools that continue to shape and support the successful implementation of inclusive practices within school.

## **School Leadership**

School leaders play a central role in establishing a culture of inclusion within a school and providing teachers with the support needed to build self-efficacy when implementing inclusive practices (Jung et al., 2019). Teachers also view the skillset of their school leaders as a direct influence on their own self-efficacy (Sakiz et al., 2018). Personally, since my school leader is educated and experienced in the area of inclusive education, it provides me with the confidence to support teachers with implementing the best practices for all students. When inclusive education involves cultural and personal beliefs, school leadership is crucial in fostering open dialogue to alleviate fears and providing a strong system of support to teachers (Taylor et al., 2016). My wife is a school social worker and LGBTQIA+ ally leader, and within the realm of teacher collaboration, her experiences presently range from supportive advocate to judgemental

avoidance. When working with students from kindergarten to grade 12, the students on her caseload often find it difficult to find consistency with the multiple teachers they have each day. School leaders are central in cultivating an environment where teachers can feel safe, develop further understanding of inclusive practices, and collaborate with peers without bias, all of which increase the self-efficacy of teachers and attitudes of students.

### **Professional Development**

Teacher professional development, both at the pre-service and experienced teaching level, is critical in promoting the most appropriate inclusive practice and continuing to strengthen teacher self-efficacy (Sharp et al., 2018). Teachers of all levels, especially beginning teachers, experience barriers when it comes to not having enough time and support to adapt curriculum for the diverse needs within the classroom (De Neve & Devos, 2015). It is important that school leaders provide effective professional development that is content specific, delivered by experts, and offered over an extended period so that teachers can engage, apply, and reflect on learned inclusive practices (Sharp et al., 2018). It is also important that school leaders identify the type of support needed among the differing levels of teacher experience within the school, and provide professional development that is specific to the needs of each teacher (Kiel et al., 2019). Understanding which teachers have low self-efficacy in certain areas will assist school leaders in tailoring professional development that is intentional and specific to school needs.

Professional development should also be made available to all staff who work within the classroom, including educational assistants (Villafuerte, 2020). Since educational assistants do not require official qualification to work within classrooms, these individuals require ongoing professional development in areas such as basic information about disabilities, instructional strategies, and different methods to support students with academic, behavioural, and emotional needs. Educational assistants who are qualified and have the knowledge needed to work in a variety of school settings increase the self-efficacy of both themselves and the classroom teacher and can promote successful collaboration needed for effective classroom environments. Professional development is perceived to be a key factor in building self-efficacy among all teachers, including educational assistants, and ultimately contributes to supporting the needs of all students within the classroom (Chao et al., 2017). Professional development not only provides teachers and educational assistants with knowledge and understanding, but also promotes a collaborative environment that is needed to establish networks in which all educators can reflect on educational practices, and co-construct successful learning opportunities for all students.

Providing teachers with professional development and the awareness of inclusive practices is an important first step to creating a culture of inclusion. However, if teachers are not provided the support network that is created through PLCs, new knowledge does not result in lasting changes (Meyer et al., 2019). Although teachers play a central role in the implementation of inclusive practices, we cannot expect that teachers can independently meet the needs of all students (Sannen et al., 2020). PLCs enable teachers to develop new skills and provide necessary feedback to each other that, in turn, enhances student learning (Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017). Collective efficacy refers to the beliefs that school members hold about the specific work groups to which they are assigned and their capability to follow through with the action plan that is necessary to reach a desired goal. Working with a range of students in different classrooms from year to year, it is essential to hold case management meetings with multiple teachers in order to provide consistent and up-to-date programming. I rely on our school's collective efficacy to make the best decisions for student-specific programming. When engaged in connected PLCs, teachers develop the confidence required to provide all students with intentional learning opportunities.

## Conclusion

One of the most challenging tasks teachers face is providing all students with equal opportunity to succeed within the classroom (De Neve & Davos, 2015). Teachers need to feel confident in providing all students with appropriate teaching, and feel that they can support behavioural needs when implementing inclusive practices (Chao et al., 2017). In order to build teacher self-efficacy, individuals must first hold positive beliefs toward inclusion (Sannen et al., 2020). Understanding local laws and legislation of inclusion makes teachers more confident in advocating for their students (Meyer et al., 2018). To build self-efficacy, it is important that educational institutions develop suitable teacher programs that provide pre-service teachers with the practical experience working alongside students with exceptional needs (Kiel et al., 2019), and the ability to differentiate instruction (Wan, 2015). When teachers enter mainstream classrooms, it is important that school leaders create an inclusive school climate that provides support and encourages inclusive dialogue among teachers (Taylor et al., 2016). Encouraging teachers to engage in regular professional learning impacts both teacher self-efficacy in inclusive practices and student achievement (Sharp et al., 2018). To make professional development effective, school leaders need to build PLCs (Yang, 2019) that enable teachers to learn together, provide feedback, and reflect on successful inclusive practices.

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### **About the Author**

*Joshua Abraham is pursuing a Master of Education (inclusive education) at Brandon University. He has a Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Education from the University of Manitoba. Aside from his resource teacher role, he enjoys spending time with his wife and two children, and participating in a variety of sports.*