

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER ATTITUDES TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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Recognising the importance of teacher attitudes to inclusion is crucial for understanding the effectiveness of inclusive education in the school and/or community. It has been reported that teachers who are more positive to inclusion have more controlled learning environments compared to teachers with more negative attitudes to inclusion (Monsen & Frederickson, 2004). The role of teachers is understated in many studies that have investigated inclusion and student experiences. It is important to understand the vital roles of teachers in fostering inclusive classrooms, and while inclusion in schools begins with the teachers, it is imperative that teachers themselves are supported by the education system through access to appropriate resources, and the provision of supportive leadership and effective policy.

Inclusion and the importance of Values and Attitudes

Inclusion is considered to be a complex and dynamic process that responds to the diversity and needs of all learners within a classroom environment (UNESCO, 2005). The success of positive inclusion relies on what happens at the ground level, hence "... it must be remembered that the commitment to inclusion begins with each educator" (Boyle et al., 2011, p. 77). From a socioecological perspective, students' experience of inclusion is deeply related to the interactions they have with the broader social environment (Anderson, Boyle & Deppeler, 2014; Boyle, 2007). Therefore, relationship factors, school climate, school and system policy and practice, as well as broad community contexts, culture, and legislation can influence the success of inclusionary approaches within a school. Of direct impact to students is their relationship with their teacher, and the role attitudes play here is significant. Attitudes stem from values, which are defined as being ones "enduring beliefs about what is right" (Loreman et al., 2011, p. 40), and whilst they exist internally, they externalise themselves in how individuals behave, and influence their reaction to situations (Baloglu, 2012). This is illustrated in Figure one.

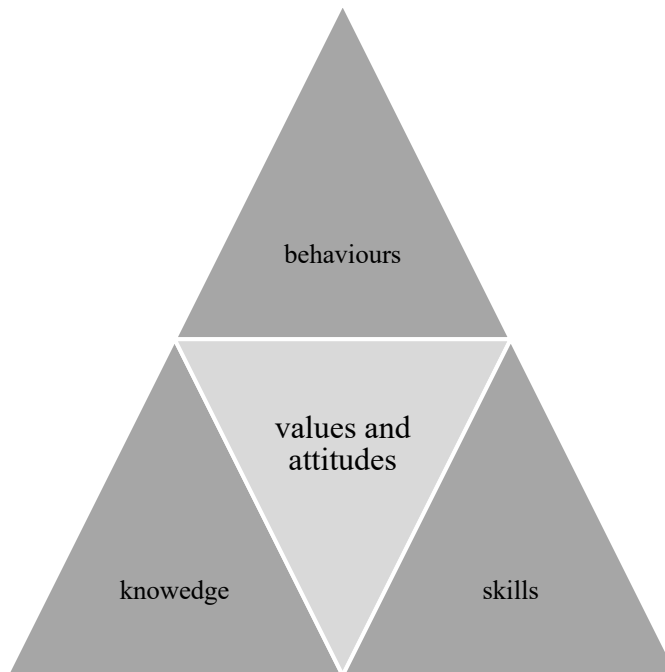


Figure 1: The influence of values and attitudes (adapted from the work of Precey and Mazurkiewicz, 2013).

It follows that teacher values and attitudes will be pivotal to how inclusion is manifested both within individual classrooms, and collectively across the whole school.

Attitude towards working with students with SEN is clearly an important subject area and the large amount of research conducted into the area over past decades is testament to its significance (Saloviita, 2015). Beliefs of the individuals working in front-line services are an essential component for the success or failure of inclusion in mainstream classrooms. When *integration* hit the educational limelight in the 1980's, teacher attitude was recognised as a potential barrier to the move towards students with SEN being placed into mainstream classrooms. A possible reason for this reluctance was described by Hannan and Pilner (1983); teachers attitudes at the time reflected the attitude of the broader community towards people with disability.

“It appears that teachers, like the general public, are not overwhelmingly positive in their attitude toward the handicapped. Indeed, while there is some variation among conditions, in general teachers seem to have negative beliefs about and feelings toward these children as well as being somewhat reluctant to enter into teaching relationships with them.” (p.22)

Recent decades have seen societal perception of disability shift in response to international declarations such as UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (1994) and the somewhat later UN Convention on the Rights of persons with Disabilities (2006). While some gains have been made in the global effort to bring to the fore the rights, both educational and social, of people with a disability, quality of life outcomes for this group are still below that of people without a disability (see Anderson and Boyle, 2019, for a wider discussion). Nevertheless, things are moving, albeit slowly, in the right direction, including in education (Munyi, 2012). Despite the negative attitudes described by Hannan and Pilner in 1983, integration was challenged and the educational debate has become about inclusion, and teacher (both practising and pre-service) attitudes towards this ideal are the focus of much research in recent years. Yet measuring this accurately has presented its own challenges, not least because inclusion is a term that has proven difficult to define and therefore how the construct is understood differs between individuals. People may perceive questions and statements about inclusion in different ways based on their own belief systems. In a study by Ward, Center and Bochner (1994) among pre-school teachers in Australia, UK, and Canada, 80% of the respondents agreed with a positively worded statement about including all children in the mainstream classroom. When the data from that study was broken down it was discovered that some types of difficulty were regarded negatively and students with these needs were considered *not* suitable for inclusion in mainstream classes. *Moderate intellectual disabilities* were given a negative rating by all staff, including educational psychologists. It is important to note that there are different opinions about inclusion and based on the survey results, it might not always be clear what respondents agreed or disagreed on.

The problem with negative attitudes

Attitudes, although drawn from cognitions, can pervasively impact teachers' affect and behavioural intentions. While teacher attitudes towards inclusion may be a product of their broader value system, as well as symptomatic of the societal and work environment that one is subjected to, negative attitudes can be unfavourable for the students in their educational charge. Negative attitudes may engender views such as some students do not have the capacity to learn, teachers do not need to teach students with varying needs, there is no time to individualise the curriculum, and students with additional needs are better educated outside mainstream schools. Usually the latter is crouched under the 'choice' banner, and as being for the student's own benefit. It would be difficult to argue that any teacher who holds these types of views is able to provide a nurturing and engaging learning environment for all

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students with SEN in their classrooms. If negative attitudes to inclusion prevail, it can affect the perception of students with additional support needs' as being able to be educated within a mainstream environment, irrespective of whether this is evidentially accurate or not. According to UNICEF (2011), if children or young people with SEN are 'othered,' they can become marginalised which can lead to bullying and ultimately, to being socially ostracised. Of course, the issue is self-fulfilling and cyclical, as represented in Figure 2.

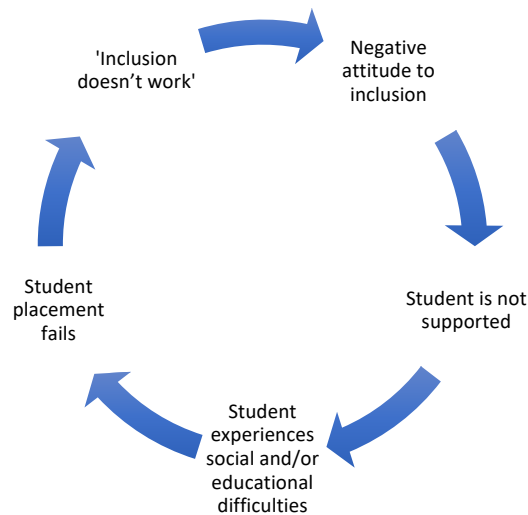


Figure 2 – The Damaging Cyclical Effect of Negative Attitudes to Inclusion

Negative attitudes to inclusion are greatly influenced by prior exposure and may be the result of a lack of knowledge about, or experience in, inclusive processes. Teaching training is therefore key to ensuring that teachers have sufficient opportunities to both understand inclusive practices, and experience inclusive classrooms. Negative attitudes, after all, have been learnt and can therefore be similarly unlearned. Positively changing prospective teachers' attitudes to inclusion during university training is an important preventative way of fostering progressive teaching around inclusion. Boyle and colleagues have conducted several studies on the attitudes of trainee teachers (e.g. Costello & Boyle, 2013; Hoskin, Boyle & Anderson, 2015; Kraska & Boyle, 2014; Varcoe & Boyle, 2014) and this is discussed in more detail later in this chapter. It should be noted here that while attitudes can be 'unlearned' or altered reasonably easily, changing underlying value systems is more difficult (Rochon, 1998). For this reason, there are some who argue for educators to be selected on the basis of having a value system that aligns to the ideal of inclusion (Dyson, Howes & Roberts, 2002). Negative attitudes

towards inclusion by teachers can create a self-fulfilling prophecy and it is reasonable to assume that unfavourable attitudes and a lack of understanding about inclusive practices may inhibit its application by teachers in school settings. Subsequently, understanding teacher attitudes towards inclusion is an important component of progressing inclusion within schools.

Pre-service teacher attitudes

Pre-service teacher attitudes to inclusion have been studied at length, with some concerning trends beginning to emerge. Students, as they progress through their degrees, become less positive towards inclusion as they move through their teacher training. Research conducted by (Costello & Boyle, 2013) reported more positive attitudes towards inclusion from students in their first year than in the following years. Another study by Saloviita (2015) came up with similar findings; students in their first year of study held positive attitudes towards inclusion (though expressed concern at the perceived workload related to it), however students who were further through their degrees began to show more negative attitudes towards ‘the desirability of inclusive education’ (p. 71). Hoskin, Boyle and Anderson (2015) found that pre-service pre-school teachers attitudes also declined during the duration of their study, however the shift was not in how they perceived inclusion, but rather in their capacity to effectively implement inclusive practices. A recent study looking at pre-service primary school students in Australia found that while attitudes towards inclusion decreased after the first year, by the final year of study students felt more positive about the inclusion of students with additional dialects, however still held concerns about students with disabilities being educated in inclusive classrooms (Goddard & Evans, 2018). Not all research has found this negative trend of declining attitudes across the course of a teaching degree. Kraska and Boyle’s study (2014) found that the majority of preschool and primary school preservice teachers they surveyed were positive about inclusive education, regardless of how far through their degrees they were. There is a myriad of reasons to explain the different results. Studies were conducted across different countries, within different universities, and across different groups of student cohorts. Saloviita (2015) also explains that the use of different survey tools can produce very different results, given the complexity of the construct – inclusion – being researched. Despite these issues, the undeniable trend of declining attitudes towards inclusion across the duration of a teacher training cannot be discounted as being of concern. The attitudes that pre-service teachers leave

their studies with, will dictate the practices they take with them into their classrooms (Goddard & Evans, 2018).

The solutions here are not simple. Gigante and Gilmore (2018) found that merely gaining knowledge (through a module or unit of work) on disability and/or special education did not improve teachers' self-efficacy for, and therefore their attitude towards, teaching in inclusive classrooms. Rather, what has been shown to improve pre-service teacher attitudes is access to a program of study pertaining to inclusive practices (Civitillo, de Moor & Vervloed, 2016). An interesting study by Lambe (2007) provided details on the attempts that were made in a Northern Irish university towards changing pre-service teacher attitudes towards inclusive education. Participants of the study included 108 student teachers (with return rate of 86.4%), who were asked to complete a questionnaire on their attitude towards inclusion at three different points in their training (at the beginning of the course, after the second phase of teaching and at the end of the course). Results showed that:

'...it is in the pre-service period that offers significant potential to influence positive attitudes. Increased concentration on this phase of teacher education might in fact provide the best means to create a new generation of teachers who will ensure the successful implementation of inclusive policies and practices in Northern Ireland.'
(Lambe, 2007, p.62)

This study supports the importance of proper guidance on teaching strategies and acceptable attitudes for the teachers of the next generation, rather than just the delivery of isolated modules or units. By the end of the second phase of this study, respondents indicated that they felt that it was imperative for all teachers to work with children who have special educational needs. Clearly, there is work to be done in Northern Ireland, and globally, vis-à-vis the attitudes and perception of pre-service teachers towards the practice of inclusion. The important point here is to recognise and accept that these negative attitudes exist, and to know that proper re-education programmes need be initiated to change these points of view.

In-service teacher attitudes

As for pre-service teachers, much research has been conducted on the attitudes towards inclusion of in-service teachers. A study in Ireland found that while teachers held positive attitudes towards the construct of inclusion, the actuality of practice was closer to that of integration, with students having to ‘fit in’ (Young, McNamara & Coughlan, 2017). These findings are similar to those of teachers in Malaysia, where Bailey, Nomanbhoy and Tubpun (2015) found that while teachers held a generally positive attitude towards inclusion as an idea, their self-efficacy to implement inclusive practices successfully was lacking and therefore their attitude towards it being possible was less positive. This link between self-efficacy and attitude was also highlighted in a comparative study between teachers in Japan and Finland. Yada, Tolvanen and Savolainen (2018) found that teachers who held a stronger belief in their capacity to enact inclusive practices successfully in their classrooms, held a more positive attitude about the construct. In a study looking at attitudes towards inclusion in India, there was a notable difference between teachers attitudes towards inclusion as a policy idea, and their ability to be able to enact that successfully within schools (Tiwari, Das & Sharma, 2015). Subban and Sharma (2006) studied the attitudes towards inclusion of students with disabilities in Victoria, Australia, and the main finding was that, ‘...*while teachers appear accepting and positive of inclusionary programs, there remains some concern about implementing inclusive education in the mainstream classroom*’ (p.51). It is interesting to note that in all of these studies there seems to be a similar thread. Teachers hold positive attitudes towards inclusion as an idea, but feel less positive about their capacity to implement inclusive practices in their classrooms. This ‘theory’ to ‘practice’ gap is of concern if inclusion is something to be pursued.

Considering aspects from a different viewpoint, Boyle et al. (2013) examined teachers’ attitudes to inclusion through a number of lenses, including that of teaching experience. The main finding from this study was that teachers became more negative about inclusion after the first year of teaching, however once at this level of attitude, it did not change significantly over the ensuing years of experience, as can be seen in Figure 3.

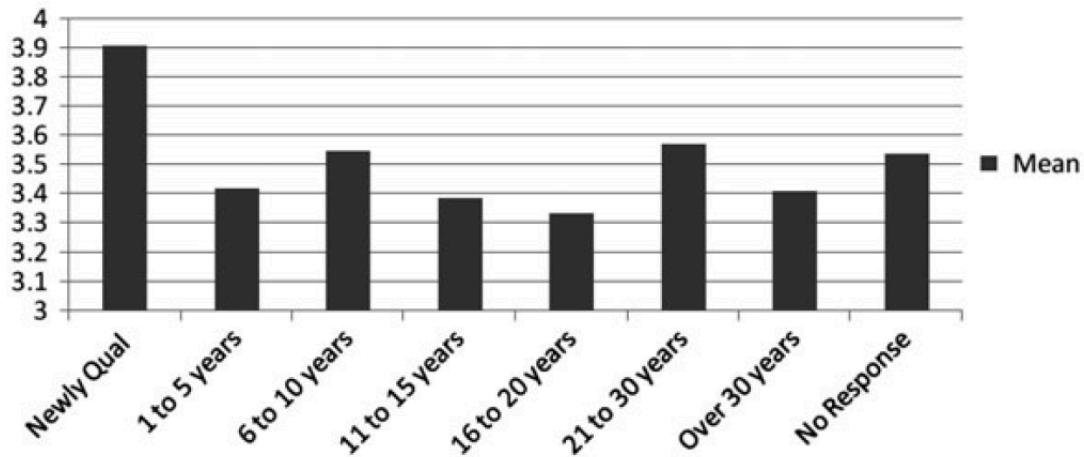


Figure 3. Overall inclusion score by length of teaching service (Boyle et al., 2013)

This significant decline in attitude from university graduate to in-service teacher was likely to have been heavily influenced by the developing understanding of the complex requirements of teaching role. This finding sits comfortably with the common theme taken from much of the research about teacher attitudes to inclusion – in theory inclusion makes sense, but the practice of successful implementation is proving itself to be much more challenging (Boyle & Anderson, Under Revision) and this is reflected in the shifting attitudes of teachers from the beginning of the teacher training degrees through to the first few years of their service.

There are clear implications for policies that attempt to bring students into the mainstream if teachers hold a negative view towards inclusion and believe that they should not be there, or that they are somebody else’s responsibility. Contrastingly, teachers who exhibit a more positive attitude to inclusion are more likely to modify their teaching approaches to help students with additional support needs (Lüke & Grosche, 2018; Subban & Mahlo, 2017).

Inclusion and teacher efficacy

An issue that was been alluded to earlier, albeit briefly, is that of the effect of teacher efficacy and its subsequent relationship to attitudes towards inclusion. A study by Parker, Hannah and Topping (2006) considered the views of 66 teachers (response rate of 50.5%) in 15 primary schools in a small Scottish local authority vis-a-vis the subject of teacher efficacy. The results of the study are summarised below:

‘...despite great concern about socio-economic deprivation, behavioural problems and low parental expectations, which led to teacher stress, these teachers saw respect for and good relations with their pupils and a positive ethos in the school as key to high attainment, sustained by teacher motivation to learn, peer support and high quality in-service training.’ (p. 9)

Although the aforementioned study was not specifically related to teacher attitudes towards inclusion, it emphasised that good relationships with peers (also a significant finding in Boyle et al., 2012), a positive school ethos, and high-quality in-service training are essential for teachers to feel that they are competent and confident in their teaching abilities. Pre-service teacher training and plentiful resources are also areas that the research has identified as being a predictor of positive self-efficacy and therefore attitudes to inclusion.

The importance of peer support

Peer support is one key to helping teachers put inclusive strategies into place in their classrooms. While different educational stakeholders may hold different opinions about inclusion, other teachers, school leaders and support staff (such as educational psychologists) are in a position to provide teachers with the support they need to implement inclusive practices. Although inclusion policies may exist, teachers play an instrumental role in the success or failure of the aims of such policy. Boyle and colleagues (2012) reported that informal and formal teacher peer support was one of the most effective resources available to teachers to ensure effective inclusive education. Support and involvement from other members of staff can have a positive influence on the outcome of inclusive contexts in the classroom (Mulholland & O' Connor, 2016; Scruggs Mastropieri, 2017). The value of peer support cannot be understated.

It is reasonable to assume that if teachers, who are absolutely the keys to the success or failure of inclusion policy, are not supportive of the main aims of the inclusion process there will be lower likelihood of success. Past research has demonstrated (Ainscow, 2015) that the involvement of teachers and other members of staff who will, effectively, be highly influential as to the outcome of the policy, is crucial.

Positive school culture

School culture, described as the ‘values, beliefs, attitudes, ways of thinking, customs and rituals’ (Berzina, 2010, p. 76) of each individual setting, has been described as a significant

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determinant of the success, or not, of inclusive practices (Berzina, 2010). If the school culture is one that promotes inclusion through enshrining its principles in school policy, processes and practices, teachers are more likely to feel supported to engage in inclusive practices in their classrooms (Parker, Hannah & Topping, 2006), and to experience success when they do this (Osiname, 2018). As noted previously, success leads to improved perceptions of teacher self-efficacy, which in turn improves their attitudes towards inclusion. School leaders, and in particular the principal, are key determinants of school culture, and the drivers of any necessary change. What this link between a positive school and teacher attitudes means for their work will be explored in more detail later on.

Pre-service and in-service teacher training, and links to perceptions

A seminal review of the literature on teacher attitudes conducted by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) recommended future research to investigate the reasons for the teachers' perceptions on inclusion, as well as the quality of training, both before and after teacher training. In another study, many teachers were found to have positive attitudes towards inclusion, but still have concerns regarding adapting and modifying classroom arrangements, in part because of a lack of relevant training (Boyle et al., 2013)

An attempt was made at a teacher training institution in the UK to provide trainee teachers with the skills to effectively modify their teaching methods to work with a wide spectrum of students including those with additional support needs (Golder, Norwich & Bayliss, 2005). A course was integrated into a professional PGCE course and trainee teachers were provided with resources such as a mentor, access to the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) for the school and strategic online support. Trainees were allocated one pupil to work with and they planned appropriate support through consultation with the SENCO and class teachers, thus gaining appropriate information on the pupil's strengths, weaknesses, and additional support needs amongst others. It was reported by the trainee teachers to be:

“...a valuable exercise, particularly with reference to improving knowledge, understanding and awareness of issues such as the identification of pupils with special educational needs, differentiation, understanding individual needs and planning for pupils with special educational needs. (Golder et al., 2005, p. 98)

The importance of providing support for teacher training and positive attitude towards teaching students with special educational needs is again highlighted in a study of teacher attitudes in

one high school in San Antonio, Texas by Van Reusen, Shoho and Barker (2001). Findings of the study are summarised by the authors in this paragraph:

“The results of this study support earlier findings that positive teacher attitudes about including and teaching students with disabilities in general education classrooms appear related to the levels of special education training, knowledge, and experience in working with or teaching students with disabilities”. (p.11)

Support is again given to the importance of not just pre-service training but, and arguably more importantly high level, good quality ongoing training that involves the appropriate input of teaching staff so that they feel that they can adequately make a difference to their teaching practice. This could respond to the recent concerns that teachers are leaving the profession because they are not getting enough SEN training post qualifying (Bennett, 2008).

Administrators and high school principals should take into consideration the attitudes to inclusion of teachers prior to the development and implementation of any professional development in this area. Van Reusen et al. (2001) suggest that one day workshops and orientations are useless, and proper ongoing training and instructional support to assist with inclusion programmes is necessary. Instead, quite often, it is the response *‘the teacher should be differentiating’* that is given when questions are raised about a teacher’s ability to work with children who require additional support, however this can be unrealistic without proper support. It follows that before a programme of inclusion is implemented, a full survey of teacher attitudes and level of experience should be conducted, to better understand what teachers need. Teachers with no background or training in SEN should be targeted even before the inclusion programme begins. Van Reusen et al. (2001) also suggested that time should be given to allow teachers to learn skills such as team teaching, in-school networking and behavioural management strategies.

Based on the results of previous studies of pre-service training, it could be postulated that education establishments must include a curriculum that will challenge negative attitudes towards inclusion and just as importantly to promote teacher competence in this area (for further discussion of this area see Carrington & Brownlee, 2001; Sharma, Forlin, Loreman & Earle, 2006). The importance of clear inclusion components and curricular subject content has been highlighted in three previous studies of pre-service teacher education (Costello & Boyle, 2013; Kraska & Boyle, 2014; Varcoe & Boyle, 2015). Taking this point to an extreme would

suggest that teachers who continually fail the ‘inclusiveness component’ should not be allowed to pass the course. Appropriate attitudes towards including students in mainstream classes are fundamental to the teaching profession and should be integral to a person qualifying as a teacher. For inclusion to be successful, universities and teaching professionals must be prepared to work together to ‘...*formulate and integrate new knowledge about inclusive learning management, particularly in the hearts and minds of those entering the profession*’ (Bradshaw & Mundia, 2006, p.39). Teachers are the key to change in education, therefore if their beliefs are negative or if they feel that they do not have the skills and resources then this could be a barrier to inclusive education.

Educational Resources vs Attitudes

While a teacher’s attitude towards inclusion is central to guiding successful inclusive practices, teachers also require systemic support through access to appropriate resources in order to foster inclusive climates. Educational resourcing is always flagged as a perennial issue in schools but this is even more prevalent when support for students with SEN is factored in (Boyle & Anderson, Under Revision; Boyle, Topping, Jindal-Snape & Norwich, 2012; Myles, Boyle & Richards, 2019). There are always demands on finite resources and with many governments attempting to be more inclusive, issues concerned with resourcing (such as a lack of specialised equipment and/or staffing) can become a barrier (whether perceived or actual) to inclusion. Attitudes and resources become central to how effective (or ineffective) inclusive practices are. Figure 4 demonstrates the notion that neither positive attitudes or plentiful resources alone can facilitate effective inclusionary practices in the classroom. In fact, in order for inclusion to work optimally, schools need both positive attitudes from teachers and plentiful classroom/school resources simultaneously. For example, a school with adequate facilities, equipment and tools for creating a climate of inclusion for all children will not be effective if the teachers that work there hold negative attitudes. Likewise, if teachers hold positive attitudes, but are affected from under resourcing, inclusionary approaches are hindered.

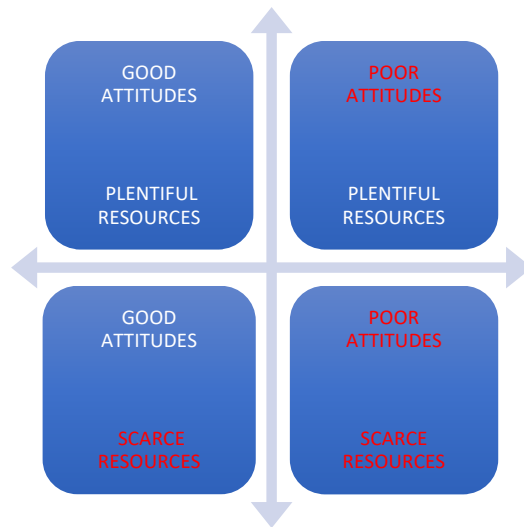


Figure 4. Attitudes vs Resources

The duality of attitudes and resources towards the success of inclusion is not new and the idea that positive attitudes towards working with students with SEN is a necessary component for positive for inclusion has been around for a long period of time, particularly in the post-Warnock era (in the UK). Empirical research supporting this notion has been around for decades, and findings do not differ greatly between studies of the 1980s and those undertaken more recently (e.g. Hannah & Pilner, 1983; Center, Ward, Parmenter & Nash, 1985; Parkins, 2002; Mitchell, 2008; Warnock, 2010; Subban & Mahlo, 2017; Page, Boyle, McKay & Mavropoulou, 2019).

Towards a positive profession

Regardless of the personal opinions and attitudes of others towards inclusion, teachers have an obligation - professional, moral and in some cases legal - to recognise and implement effective inclusive strategies. The evidence suggests that this will happen more effectively if teachers hold a positive attitude to the construct (Boyle et al, 2011).

Positive attitudes for inclusion begin with the teacher, who has the power to shape and influence how inclusion is viewed and applied within a school (Boyle et al., 2011). However, this cannot be the work of the teacher alone. Leaders within the school - those responsible for delivering school policies and processes, and driving effective practices, including the school principal - must also hold a positive attitude towards inclusion to ensure the school has a culture

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that embraces and celebrates diversity, or are at least open to this notion. If teachers are not supported through a positive school culture and inclusive schoolwide processes, resources, materials and/or tools for inclusion will not be enough. Even professional development in isolation is likely to be of no use unless inclusion is nurtured and supported at the school level, and teachers hold positive attitudes towards its implementation.

If one considers teachers as the public face of education, and within the particular parameters of this chapter, as that of the face of inclusion, then it follows that these ‘street level workers’ in any system (to borrow from Lipsky, 1980, 2010) are the teachers. The success or failure of government policy rests on their ability or, indeed, willingness to implement the policy objectives. Teacher attitudes to inclusion are highly influential in shaping their level of motivation to effectively implement inclusion at the school and class level (Boyle et al., 2013; Hoskin et al., 2015).

Policy for inclusion

Policy makers around the world continue to include the terms inclusion or inclusive education in the work they do. Regrettably, this has not translated into successful inclusive practices within systems and individual schools, and as a result Slee (2018) describes the current rhetoric in policy as ‘an empty language’ (p. 20). There are many reasons for this. One such reason is that inclusion policy has been enacted alongside other reform agendas, such as standardisation and competition (Schlessinger, 2018), which run counterintuitively to the philosophical underpinnings of inclusive education (Artiles & Kozleski, 2016). This type of paradoxical policy implementation is challenging for practitioners (Etkins, 2013); when there are competing discourses from different sectors within an educational organisation, which are they to adhere to? Another reason is that ‘...*policymakers often advocate inclusive education without an understanding of the pedagogical approaches that teachers can use to operationalise the policy*’ (Nind & Wearmouth, 2006, p.122). Without an understanding of how to enact inclusion and the supports required for its implementation, school leaders and teachers are not going to have the systemic supports they need to deliver the outcomes of the policy.

Further examination of why inclusion policies have not had the intended outcomes is beyond the scope of this chapter, however from the two reasons explored (albeit briefly) above, it is evident that policies have not made the inroads to inclusive reform that perhaps they could. For this to change, policy makers need to acknowledge and understand the barriers and challenges that are getting in the way of inclusive reform. Part of this is recognising the role teacher attitudes play in the reform process. Until this time, inclusive reform remains the responsibility of the schools, and it is up to school leaders to ensure school policies and processes are meeting the needs of all students who pass through the school gate.

Implications for School Leadership

Research has consistently reflected the importance of school leadership as a predictor of school culture (Piotrowsky, 2016; Fullan, 2014). Principals and school leaders have a far-reaching level of influence on students, teachers, parents and the wider school community; on the ‘values, ideals, aspirations, emotions and identities’ of these different groups (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 384). The way this influence presents itself is determined by the leadership practices adopted and applied by the principal (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008). This dictates that principals are the key participant in directing school change and creating schools that support teachers to meet the needs of all students (Macmillan & Edmunds, 2010), and they are identified as being even more important in schools with heterogenous populations (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013, p. 245). Principals must work to create a culture where the school takes responsibility for overcoming ‘socially constructed barriers to learning’ for all students (Ekins, 2013, p. 30); a school with a focus on inclusive education practices (Carter & Abawi, 2018). When school leaders set an expectation for inclusion, and provide the supports to do so, teachers are more likely to hold a positive attitude towards it. As such, research has found that it is essential that teaching staff are involved in the implementation of school inclusion policy if it is to be fully accepted and applied at school (Boyle et al., 2013). Supportive leadership is needed to ensure positive, proactive school policies are in place, professional development and training is implemented, and the overall school culture is providing a nurturing and inclusive environment for all students.

Conclusion

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While discussions of inclusive practices can be stuck at a policy and practice level, using a socio-ecological lens to view inclusion can guide schools towards acknowledging a whole-school approach to creating a culture of inclusion. Within this framework is the importance of student-teacher relationships, and teacher attitudes and beliefs. However, teacher attitudes alone are not sufficient to influence inclusion within a school setting. It is essential that teachers are supported by proactive leadership, supportive peers and policy that is cohesive and consistent with their beliefs toward inclusion. Some of this is the responsibility of the schools, and some of the systems they operate within.

Research showed that current practices are not consistently meeting school goals, expectations or legislator requirements towards inclusion (Anderson & Boyle, 2019). Understanding whether inclusion is successful in the various spheres of education is problematic (Forlin et al., 2013), and this is confounded by the complexity of the construct itself. Slee (2018) argues that rather than debating the nuances of what inclusion is, work should be considered in terms of eliminating exclusionary practices. To do this, those working with students at the coal face - the teachers - need to feel positively about their capacity to support and nurture all students through the utilisation of inclusive strategies and practices in their classrooms. While approaches to inclusion may (and in fact should) vary from individual to individual, school to school, and country to country, there is much work to be done to continue ensuring that all schools, and teachers, are meeting the needs of all students (Boyle & Sharma, 2015). Understanding teachers attitudes towards inclusion and how this can be improved, is an important step forward.

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