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## Collaborative Partnership: Developing Pre-service Teachers as Inclusive Practitioners to Support Students with Disabilities

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### ABSTRACT

Since the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation including Australian Disability Discrimination Act, 1992 and the Disability Standards of Education, 2005, there is an increasing demand on all schools to cater effectively for more students with disabilities within an inclusive school community context. This investigation explored a proactive partnership model designed to equip pre-service teachers with deeper role understandings in teaching students with disabilities. This collaborative model involved sustained professional experiences in schools on four mornings each week over 38 weeks, offered in conjunction with their final-year teacher education studies in Diversity and Inclusive Education. A unique emphasis of this qualitative study was a focus on identifying conducive real-life experiences and ideal teacher qualities for undertaking challenging inclusive practitioner roles. Findings highlighted the perspectives of school leaders, special education mentors and pre-service teachers in improving inclusive learning outcomes for all students while developing an effective collaborative partnership model for teacher education.

### KEYWORDS

Collaborative; disabilities; education; inclusive; partnership; pre-service; reflexive; teacher

### Introduction

The debates on how best to prepare pre-service teachers for diverse, inclusive classrooms have led to some teacher educators working more closely with schools in trialling new approaches (Florian, 2012). The current research sought to examine perspectives of school leaders, special education mentors and pre-service teachers on fostering conducive experiences and qualities of inclusive practitioners in catering for students with disabilities. The Special Education Immersion Project commenced in 2012 as a collaborative pilot study between the employing sector's Education Office (Sydney) and the University's Faculty of Education. It aimed to support children with disabilities in selected schools while offering final fourth-year pre-service teachers in the Bachelor of Education course with a sustained whole-school inclusive teaching experience. A key purpose of the Immersion Project was to understand critical aspects of what kinds of professional experiences and personal qualities are necessary for pre-service teachers in meeting the ongoing challenges of inclusive teaching roles with students with disabilities.

Research studies have shown the valuable role teacher education has in promoting positive attitudes towards inclusion, highlighting the need to prepare teachers who are both capable and dedicated (Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth, 2013; de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011). In Australia, legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act, 1992 and the Disability Standards of Education, 2005 give all students the right to access their local school and receive a high-quality education. Yet, despite these advances, not all pre-service teachers feel adequately prepared to meet these inclusive challenges (Bentley-Williams & Morgan, 2012). This research sought to address this problem of perceived inadequacy by connecting more closely with the employing sector and schools to build graduate teacher capacity in making smooth transitions into the teaching profession. In doing so, the current research aimed to examine what professional experiences and qualities school leaders, special education mentors and pre-service teachers identified for enhancing successful inclusive practice.

Current national teacher education developments include the establishment of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2010, with a leadership role in the promotion of equity and excellence in the teaching profession and school leadership. The AITSL provides a consistent approach to accreditation measured against Professional Standards. For example, to meet the Graduate Teaching Standards, pre-service teachers are required to demonstrate an understanding of 'the principles of inclusion and strategies for differentiating teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities'. Accordingly, policy-makers have recently emphasised the need for more support in teaching students with disabilities in the AITSL *Report on Initial Teacher Education*, (2014). At a broader level, this current move to national accreditation challenges university teacher educators and employing sectors to work more closely together in advancing inclusive practice to cater for the growth in student diversity.

Improving teacher capacity is an ongoing concern for both governmental and non-governmental sectors throughout the teaching profession. Previous inclusive education studies had identified that approaches such as participation in professional learning, developing strategies for inclusion into the whole-school culture and involvement in collaborative efforts of school sectors and universities gave much needed support in formative early career development (Billingsley, 2004; Brownell, Hirsch, & Seo, 2004; Florian, 2012; Florian, Young, & Rouse, 2010). Understanding the complexity of diversity and the need to foster dispositions aligned with social justice principles has led researchers to advocate for reconsidering approaches rather than a continuation of fragmented, superficial treatment of diversity in teacher education (Mills, 2008). While recent research has recognised collaborative engagement as a key construct within the special education field in preparing pre-service teachers to develop dispositions, beliefs and practices (Gillies, 2014), there remains a paucity of planned, systemic, collaborative approaches. Effective collaboration is described as a communication process in which various and diverse perspectives are interrogated until a consensual understanding is reached between stakeholders (Keeffe & Carrington, 2007). It involves shared decision-making with staff, students, parents and members of the local community, participating in professional learning communities (Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2011). Nevertheless, Forlin and Chambers (2011) found that simply developing knowledge about inclusive legislation and policy, along with increasing confidence levels, did not adequately address early career teachers' underlying concerns about inclusive education.

Prior research on teacher quality has shown the importance of producing teachers who have inclusive dispositions that are warm and welcoming (Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008). Being a reflexive practitioner was identified as another key mediating quality for teachers in confronting assumptions and raising awareness of diverse learning needs (Cole & Knowles, 2000). Several studies showed that engaging in reflexive learning enhanced pre-service teachers' deeper understanding about themselves and others, while promoting professional discourses in inclusive education (Bentley-Williams & Morgan, 2013; Cole & Knowles, 2000; Davies et al., 2004). Furthermore, researchers considered personalised reflexive learning may provide a meta-cognitive approach for enhancing pre-service teachers' deeper role understandings by questioning assumptions, continually examining actions and learning from mistakes (Krishnamurthy, 2007). Additionally, the impact of linking teacher education with real-life experiences was shown to have potential to influence pre-service teachers' feelings of comfort, capacity to face dilemmas and engage in better coping skills, when there were opportunities for collaboration, problem-solving and situated learning experiences across university and school settings (Bentley-Williams, 2005; Carroll, Forlin, & Jobling, 2003; Graham, 2007; Putnam & Borko, 2000).

## Methodology

This current investigation adopted a situated, constructivist theoretical orientation (Putnam & Borko, 2000), recognising the importance of personal, professional learning histories while still considering a broad sociocultural framework to guide reflexive learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Mertens, 2009; Wasburn, Wasburn-Moses, & Davis, 2012). Underpinning the Special Education Immersion Project was a collaborative professional learning community approach (Dettmer, Knackendoffel, & Thurston, 2013; Fulton & Britton, 2011; Loreman et al., 2011), in which all stakeholders worked together to improve teaching and learning for all students.

The qualitative research was designed to extend the pre-service teachers' reflexive learning into real-life schooling contexts that would provide enriched experiences in identifying complex diverse issues affecting differentiated inclusive practices (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan, & Shaw, 2000; Strickland, 2007; Tomlinson & Allen, 2000). Additionally, a multi-faceted approach across stakeholders was considered important in strengthening the connections between theory and practice for the pre-service teachers, while engaging in sustained inclusive teaching experiences with students with disabilities, in conjunction with their university studies.

The main research focus was to investigate what experiences and qualities were considered important for pre-service inclusive teacher education development. Therefore, the current research investigated how the pre-service teachers went about forming relationships and carrying out their responsibilities in catering for students with disabilities, under the guidance of a special education mentor and a school leader, in each of the five Project schools. The research examined:

- What were the pre-service teachers' experiences and perspectives in understanding students with disabilities and their roles?
- What conducive qualities of inclusive practitioners were identified?
- How might a collaborative professional learning community approach support pre-service teachers transitioning into schools?

## Method

A qualitative multi-site case study method (Stake, 2000) and constructivist theoretical approach was used to examine the richness of the pre-service teachers' reflections on their unique lived experiences in the Special Education Immersion Project. Five school contexts provided the sites depicting social phenomena across inclusive teaching and learning practice for children with and without disabilities. The flexibility and openness of qualitative case study inquiry was pertinent in this research for capturing the concerns faced by individuals in grappling with complex ideas and issues. The use of a multi-site case study approach offered a naturalistic qualitative method for exploring diverse personal perspectives and for linking understandings with social phenomena in order to understand what was common and particular to the case (Stake).

This case study method was designed to assist with verification of instances of distinctive personal dimensions of experiences, revealing the nature of meanings that individuals constructed and illuminating the kinds of challenges faced by the participants in clarifying their understanding of inclusive practice. The focus was on an analysis of perspectives on contributing qualities supporting pre-service teachers' situated reflexive learning about students with disabilities, their roles and ways of facilitating effective inclusive practices.

## Recruitment of Participants

The collaborative University and Education Office planning team were keen to attract high-quality pre-service teachers for the Special Education Immersion Project pilot study in its first year of operation. Hence, the opportunity to participate in the Project was offered to all pre-service teachers at the end of Year 3 of the four Bachelor of Education course. This cohort of pre-service teachers was at a stage in their studies where they had completed three-quarters of their course and met supervised professional experience requirements. In line with Education sector policies, pre-service teachers entering Year 4 are eligible to apply for a casual teaching number and undertake paid casual teaching in schools for their final unsupervised 10 casual days of professional experience. Consequently, the Project team recognised that the need for sound incentives to attract pre-service teachers who would be prepared to commit valuable time, effort and resources to the Project.

As a financial incentive, the sector's Education Office through their funded grant from the Commonwealth Government's Special Education initiative, *More Support for Students with Disabilities*, provided remuneration for pre-service teachers, as contracted employees paid on an hourly rate of approximately AUD\$28.00. Under this model, the time commitment for the Project required pre-service teachers to work in their allocated school for two hours daily on four mornings each week during literacy and numeracy blocks, for a total of 38 school weeks. Additionally, potential pre-service teachers were advised they would be supported with professional development workshops through the Education Office. At the school level, there were supervisory and mentoring supports arranged for pre-service teachers from a special education teacher or learning support officer. While at the university level, timetables for lectures and tutorials were organised to accommodate the Project. From a large cohort of approximately 150 pre-service teachers, there were 12 who expressed interest in being involved in the Special Education Immersion Project pilot study, and of these applicants, 10 who met the eligibility criteria of undertaking the final year in their Bachelor of Education course.

### *Participants and Procedures*

Ten pre-service teachers in fourth year of the Bachelor of Education course volunteered for the Special Education Immersion Project and agreed to participate in the research. Each of these pre-service teachers was allocated to one of the five volunteer sector-selected schools. Six pre-service teachers were paired and worked in three schools, three other pre-service teachers worked together in the fourth school and one pre-service teacher worked individually in the fifth school. Background demographics on the research participants included:

- ten pre-service teachers consisting of seven female/three male; aged 20–25 years with one mature-aged male
- five school leaders/principals consisting of all female; aged 48–62 years old; with 25–42 years teaching and leadership experience; and one of whom had gifted/talented/multicultural qualification
- six special education mentors consisting of five female/one male; aged 29–54 years; 2–22 years inclusive teaching experience; and three had special education qualifications.

Data sources included semi-structured interviews with participants and an analysis of the pre-service teachers' reflective learning journal entries over the 38 weeks in schools. The interviews were conducted by a member of the research team with the school leaders and special education mentors during arranged school visits, and with the pre-service teachers on the university campus. An interview protocol consisted of the following questions:

- How have you found the experience?
- What were some of the strengths of the Project for your students, teachers and school?
- What were some of the lowest/highest moments for you?
- What gave you the greatest difficulty/challenges or concern?
- What have you gained from the experience?

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Two members of the research team independently coded the data for emerging themes. They met to compare themes, check for inter-reliability and through collaboration were able to reach consensus on the key themes relating to real-life experiences, understandings and qualities for enhancing successful inclusive practice.

### **Results**

Participant data revealed the unique and shared perspectives of pre-service teachers, school leaders and special education mentors as they reflected on their engagement in inclusive teaching and learning experiences throughout the Project. Based on an analysis of the data sources, five main themes were identified as important in contributing to deeper role understandings of inclusive practitioners, namely:

- Responsiveness to the unique school's culture
- Making adjustments for children with disabilities
- Openness to professional and personal change/development/growth
- Qualities of flexibility, adaptability and resourcefulness
- Understanding of diversity and effective inclusive pedagogy.

Each of these themes depicted participants' real-life understandings of what they considered mattered for successful inclusive practice.

### ***Responsiveness to the Unique School's Culture***

Adjusting to the unique school context was a relevant consideration for all pre-service teachers, school leaders and special education mentors. In particular, one school leader was pleased with how well the familiarisation and transition processes had occurred:

I just think of how well they have fitted into the school community. At the end of last term I took all the teachers out for dinner to celebrate the end of term. It had been a hard term with a lot of things happening and I sent the email out to everyone and they (pre-service teachers) got it and said 'did you mean us too?' I replied – 'Of course I did!' And so, they are that much a part of the school, even though they are only here in the mornings. (School #4)

Participants' comments showed that they considered being able to work together productively was crucial for building a sense of teaming. The staff in each of the schools had made pre-service teachers feel welcomed, as one reflected:

I really feel like a part of the school. The staff has made me feel so welcome and capable of my teaching ability. I definitely don't feel like a practicum student, I feel like a respected colleague. (Nancy)

Another pre-service teacher reflected on the staff's collegiality, commenting:

This school had the greatest school atmosphere that I have ever encountered in all my practicum and my schooling years. There was no social hierarchy among the teachers and teachers' aides (as I have seen in other schools) and it was evident that they all worked effectively with one another. (Elizabeth)

The ease in the transition of pre-service teachers into the classroom was captured well by a school leader's remarks on the experience:

It has been a very, very smooth transition. It has been learning for them and it has been learning for us. It really enhances our ability to give opportunities to the students here. So I only have positive things to say. It is a great experience. (School # 2)

Throughout the sustained year-long experience, there were opportunities for pre-service teachers to fill a number of roles depending on their interests. For example, at one school, the school leader mentioned:

We asked the pre-service teachers what they wanted and they were given the option of working with a small group or with a class. So we tried to make this Project responsive to them. (School #5)

The sustained placement fostered authentic learning opportunities for pre-service teachers while enhancing a deeper understanding of students with disabilities and the unique school culture.

### ***Making Adjustments for Children with Disabilities***

Special education mentors recognised the pre-service teachers' efforts in supporting individual student's achievements and provided their encouragement. As Alex, a pre-service teacher, reflected:

My mentor came up to me at the end of the week and told me that one of the girls in my group had told her that she liked being a part of my maths group and that she could see herself

improving. Hearing this was such a nice way to end off the week. It makes me feel like I'm really making a difference in these students' lives (Alex)

Additionally, school leaders and mentors reported on the commitment to improving outcomes for all students was characteristic of the pre-service teachers. At one school, the school leader commented:

It has been nothing but positive and our children have really benefited from it, because we had an intervention program set up before. We used parents before but sometimes it falls down, they don't come with the skills that a pre-service teacher has. These people have come with the skills that the children need and that has made a huge difference. (School #3)

In a similar way, another school leader expressed gratitude for the additional support, reflecting:

On a school level the additional teacher in a classroom for support is critical. In an open classroom we have 10 reading groups. T (the child with a disability) would be lost and having these additional teachers is heaven sent. They have alleviated my concern as the student is being catered for on an individual program and everything is recorded. (School #4)

Pre-service teachers were making appropriate adjustments within an inclusive classroom context.

### ***Openness to Professional and Personal Change/Development/Growth***

The ideal dispositions of the pre-service teachers in volunteering for the Immersion Project were clearly recognised by a school leader who pointed out:

I figure university pre-service teachers who are going to put themselves forward for this sort of Project are going to have that little bit of extra initiative about them and they just are really personable and really easy to communicate with. They always greet people and are very present to the children that they are working with. And so, the kids really love them. (School #3)

Although some reservation held by one pre-service teacher was noted when another school leader commented that her confidence would come with the right experiences, reflecting:

I'm very pleased with how the program is going. She supports the year 2 classroom students. She also works with a special needs student in year 5. She attends the special needs meeting and I think that is really good because it is the engine room about what is happening at the school. Her class teacher is part of that also so I think it is important for student teachers to be part of that. If they see a need I think they need to get out there and do it and she does, even though she is a reserved type of person. (School #1)

Pre-service teachers were challenged both personally and professionally in supporting a student with a disability. The extended time involved in a sustained experience gave pre-service teachers the opportunity to consider changes in themselves as Marie, a pre-service teacher, revealed:

Words cannot explain how much I have learned from this journey. I have learned many different techniques on how to diffuse certain outbreaks in students, I have learned how to be flexible around the unpredictable and chaotic schedule of the school, I have learned that sometimes the lessons that I have planned don't go the way I had hoped and most importantly I have learned how to truly develop a strong relationship with my students. (Marie)

The pre-service teachers expressed their raised awareness through reflexive learning and building positive teacher–student relationships, evident as another pre-service teacher, Sam, explained:

I found that one of the biggest things I'll take out of this experience is to ensure that as a teacher, I may be the only positive relationship that my students may have. If I ensure that I am always of a caring and approachable nature, I may be able to improve the outcomes of my students in ways which are highly advantageous and positive. (Sam)

Real-life experiences had reaffirmed the crucial role a teacher plays in facilitating their students' learning outcomes.

### ***Qualities of Flexibility, Adaptability and Resourcefulness***

Another key theme of being flexible, adaptable and resourceful emerged as participants reflected on what it meant to be an inclusive teacher. Ideal, expansive qualities featured when one pre-service teacher, Andy, commented:

I have developed and gained many new skills throughout the participation of the Immersion Program. I have learnt many new ways of teaching students the same concept in different ways. I have learnt about the many different programs, activities and resources to use according to the child's learning needs. (Andy)

Similarly, school leaders and mentors focused on the need for flexibility and reflected on how the pre-service teachers had come prepared to be open to new ways of adapting to local school needs. For example, two of the school leaders noted:

She was very well-prepared she is very competent and capable. She couldn't be better prepared she was very flexible and willing to have a go at anything, she was very ready to go. (School #1)

When asked what was needed to be an inclusive teacher, another school leader suggested:

They have to be innovative and resourceful. They have to be flexible and willing to try other things. It is a hard but you keep rolling on. (School #5)

School leaders were mindful of the need for flexibility and noted:

We are very flexible, we had our learning support meeting on Monday and they do that and are coming to meetings ... Maybe we can work more flexibly around the university break. These pre-service teachers are very dedicated and this will be good on their CV. They are getting a wonderful, rich experience ... They are very committed. (School #4)

Qualities of flexibility and adaptability were identified as vital for responsive, inclusive practice. As one pre-service teacher, Nick, reflected in his learning journal:

I used to get bogged down in having to be right all the time. I believe that by opening up to students and allowing them to see your human side breaks down barriers and builds an unyielding rapport. The main thing that I have taken out of this project is that a teacher is just as much a learner as their students. I have evolved not only as a teacher but as a person. The reflexive nature of this experience has allowed me to analyse and critique every facet of myself. (Nick)

The ongoing nature of continual learning was recognised when another pre-service teacher, Enya, realised:

It's true! I shouldn't figure out WHY but rather, HOW can I help her? What strengths does she have? And HOW can I bring these strengths out so that she can showcase her work and increase confidence. Therefore, this week I came to many conclusions and I think it was a really good week. I feel that I have matured this week, both as a teacher and as an individual. My passion to help others really hasn't faded. In fact, it's getting stronger. The problem is, I'm still learning too. (Enya)

Connecting with colleagues to guide their learning enhanced pre-service teachers' confidence in their teaching strategies with students. Another pre-service teacher summarised her experience as 'rich and relevant' (Eileen).

### *Understanding of Diversity and Effective Inclusive Pedagogy*

Overall, keeping the focus on catering for student diversity was central to pre-service teachers' reflections. As Sam noted:

This is one of the most important lessons I will take from my experiences in this program. To always remember to have positive and real expectations of all my students. The moment I give up on a student is the moment I should give up my profession. (Sam)

The pre-service teachers' reflections indicated that they were taking responsibility for their own learning and becoming resourceful as evident when Megan commented:

My professional practice has evolved due to my participation in the project. I have developed my own teaching and learning programs through organisation and selection of appropriate resources to facilitate my teaching. In order to communicate effectively with students, I have observed and used a range of inquiry techniques, teaching strategies and have the ability to use a range of tools that engage students in their learning. (Megan)

While another school leader remarked on how the pre-service teacher had demonstrated effective pedagogy in making learning fun and the children's eagerness to be with the pre-service teacher, stating:

So for the children it has been great, as they have these highly motivated pre-service teachers working with them. They make the program fun and the children want to go so it has been a plus, plus all the way. The pre-service teachers themselves have been made aware of the great need for differentiation in schools. (School #2)

The concept of differentiation had broadened the pre-service teachers' understanding of effective pedagogy and improved students' learning outcomes. A school leader appreciated the pre-service teachers' role, commenting:

Having them here has been brilliant. Our students are actually seeing someone. They are finally getting the help they need. That has been a real load off our minds as they are not being left behind because we are so busy. The pre-service teachers have been very good at being able to pick up and run with our programs, they have been a real strength. They are very open to working with kids with additional needs. We have noticed they are actually suggesting things that could help along the way. (School #5)

The dynamic nature of the role was evident. A school leader was keen to invest time in developing the pre-service teachers, explaining:

We are teaching them (pre-service teachers) how to read a psychologist's report. We are making time for them to learn about it. So they are getting a taste of it all. (School #4)

Whereas, another school leader considered exchanging new ideas was beneficial for all, noting:

We get to see the new techniques that are coming through the university and they pass those on to us ... We have the student with the greatest need at the moment so it has been clearly about ensuring the student with disability feels as though she belongs. It has been a learning curve for us. (School #2)

The nature of the rapport built between the pre-service teachers and the students with disabilities was considered critical at each of the schools. Overall, the school leaders, special

education mentors and pre-service teachers reported very positively on the Project and their individual and shared experiences.

## Discussion

An analysis of findings from the Special Education Immersion Project revealed that real-life, whole-of-school professional experiences were fundamental for facilitated pre-service teachers' situated, reflexive learning. Opportunities to work with special education mentors and school leaders in supporting students with disabilities had made a positive impact on the pre-service teachers and on the wider school and parent communities. The five selected schools provided occasions for pre-service teachers to be included into the whole-school community life and enabled a genuine sense of belonging. Dispositions of caring and responsiveness to others had featured in pre-service teachers' reflections.

The research findings highlighted the benefits of a sustained year-long professional experience for situated learning for pre-service teachers. The partnerships developed across the university, sector and schools fostered a climate of collaborative engagement for school leaders, special education mentors and pre-service teachers. The five identified themes of *Responsiveness to the unique school's culture; Making adjustments for children with disabilities; Openness to professional and personal change/development/growth; Qualities of flexibility, adaptability and resourcefulness; and Understanding of diversity and effective inclusive pedagogy* were identified as fundamental in professional discourses about inclusive practice.

Key findings revealed the benefits of more sustained time in schools and demonstrated an effective collaborative partnership model. There was a strong link between theory and practice in providing pre-service teachers with an array of whole-of-school experiences in actually catering for students with disabilities. Mentors were carefully selected and showed their genuine commitment to wanting to guide the development of transitioning pre-service teachers. Accountability at all levels of the school, sector and university was essential to ensure the success of the collaborative partnership. Project findings provided valuable evidence for ongoing funding and resource support to continue with its wider implementation across more schools.

In summary, new directions in collaborative university, sector and school partnerships need to be carefully planned. This study brought to light:

- The concept of partnerships in pre-service teacher education is still evolving
- There has been a shift from the traditional few weeks block practicum to a more collaborative model with sustained time in schools to foster a climate for productive teacher-student relationships
- Partnerships appear to enhance the likelihood of smoother transitions from university to schools with improved teacher quality
- Effective partnership models have experienced leaders and mentors with systemic, school-wide support structures
- Positive outcomes for students with disabilities, their families and wider school communities were enhanced by collegial interactions
- The nature of hospitality of schools made the implementation of the Project an enjoyable experience for all.

## Conclusion

There is a continual challenge for educators to explore better ways of understanding and supporting all students. The insights from this research may guide others in promoting sustained, real-life inclusive experiences and enhancing qualities of pre-service teachers. Professional learning communities in universities, sectors and school communities all have a stake in facilitating pre-service teachers' development as they transition to their new roles as early career teachers with responsibilities for improving learning outcomes for all their students.

The current research identified what mattered in the kinds of pre-service teachers entering into careers in inclusive education and the value of collaborative partnerships. As a result, there is a need for university and education systems to reflect on the key issues raised and the impact of sustained professional experiences for supporting pre-service capacity building and furthering quality teacher education. The collaborative partnership between the university and the employing sector in planning and overseeing the Project provided timely insights regarding the importance of macro-systems working together. The sustained year-long timeframe helped raise awareness of all stakeholders to appreciate the complexity of student diversity, while understanding the varying nature of pre-service teachers' sense of self-efficacy in becoming inclusive practitioners.

Participants' data highlighted the benefits of more time in schools and demonstrated that a year-long placement in one school was an effective model for growth, development and change. Additionally, the Project's findings revealed that there should be a strong link between pedagogical theory and inclusive practice to connect pre-service teachers' reflexive learning with practical real-life experiences.

The overriding goal of this current research was to lead to better prepared pre-service teachers who graduate from their course with knowledge, skills and confidence in their ability to teach all students. The way forward requires advancing innovation for expanded university–sector partnerships in collaboration with diverse school communities to meet the unfolding, inclusive teaching challenges ahead.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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