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Probing and problematizing teacher professional development for inclusion

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the nature and extent to which special education professional development (PD) in schools influences teachers' perceptions of inclusion. Drawing upon theorizing of inclusion, including Slee's notion of 'exclusive schooling' and Florian and colleagues' concept of 'inclusive pedagogy', the research employs Saldana's thematic analysis/coding approach to identify key themes from the insights of 120 Canadian elementary and secondary teachers. The results reveal complex, perhaps unanticipated findings, including that increased exposure to current PD in special education appears to have detrimental effects upon teachers' beliefs in, and understandings of inclusion. The research suggests the need for much closer attention to the nature of the PD experiences of teachers to counter more 'exclusive' practices, and to foster more inclusive pedagogies.

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1. Introduction

Currently, there is a strong focus upon inclusion in schools, and an increased emphasis upon both formal and informal teacher professional development (PD) to assist teachers to become more inclusive in their practices. This push seeks to cater for the full diversity of students' needs. Since the Salamanca Agreement (UNESCO, 1994) explicitly recognized that inclusion is considered the best way for *all* students to learn, the call for the adoption of inclusive practices in schools has become more urgent. However, teachers struggle to enact inclusion more broadly, including in the form of inclusive pedagogies, perhaps reflecting, in part, the disparate discourses that surround inclusive education policies in general (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). This paper explores the nature and extent to which teachers' PD (both formal and informal) enables and/or constrains teachers' understandings of and beliefs about inclusion and inclusive pedagogies. We argue it is important to explore the extent to which dominant PD practices actually cultivate a more inclusive disposition on the part of teachers, if indeed they do.

2. Conceptualizing inclusion and inclusive pedagogies

Internationally, inclusion is understood in complex ways. For example, international policies that purport to foster 'inclusion' are actually characterised by multiple and contested meanings (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). Furthermore, analyses of reviews of literature on what constitutes inclusion in educational settings reveal a privileging of issues of special

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educational needs, and disabilities (see Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2013; de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011; De Vroey, Struyf, & Petry, 2016). This privileging of these areas is also evident within specific research studies within and across international settings (see Agbenyega and Klibthong, 2014; Bailey, Nomanbhoy, & Tubpun, 2015; Burstein, Sears, Wilcoxon, Cabello, & Spagna, 2004; Grenier 2010; McLeskey & Waldron, 2007; Ross-Hill, 2009; Strogilos, 2012; Ypinazar and Pagliano, 2004). Waitoller and Artiles (2013) review of professional development of inclusive educational research (2000–2009) revealed three definitions of inclusive education, focusing on: (1) ability differences; (2) curricula adaptation in response to gender and cultural differences (but not ability differences), and; (3) a broader conception of inclusion, oriented towards overcoming obstacles to learning and participation for all students (regardless of circumstances).

Slee (2013) flags the difficulty of identifying or describing inclusion *per se* in his call to focus more explicitly on evidence to the contrary – i.e. ‘exclusive’ practices; rather than ‘labouring towards pristine definitions of inclusion’, it may be more profitable to identify what he describes as ‘the nature, patterns and impact of exclusion’ (p. 2). We agree with Slee (2011) that ‘mainstream’ schooling is not so much a moniker seeking to capture conceptions of the majority of ‘regular’ students/schooling, but a signifier of exclusion. Consequently, and reflecting this complexity, including at an international level, we understand inclusion to be a contested concept, even as it seeks to capture efforts of educators to value all students.

An important part of this focus on inclusion in schooling settings relates to what has been described as ‘inclusive pedagogies’. In their work on developing teachers as agents of inclusion and social justice, Pantić and Florian (2015) argue inclusive pedagogies are designed to help redress the external causes of educational inequality (see also Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) from which this later work has been developed). They characterize such pedagogies as a more specific means of addressing issues of inclusion than the more general term ‘inclusive education’. They define an inclusive pedagogical approach as a way of attending:

to individual differences between learners while actively avoiding the marginalisation of some learners and/or the continued exclusion of particular groups, for example, ethnic minority students, those from culturally diverse backgrounds, non-native language speakers, students with additional needs, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who may be disadvantaged by poverty (p. 334).

Such an encompassing approach is premised on ‘open-ended views of all children’s potential for learning’ (p. 340), and seeks to ensure that teachers provide opportunities for everyone in classroom and schooling settings. Such an approach also construes teachers as ‘competent agents whose beliefs about students’ capacity to learn, pedagogical choices and ways of working with others influence student outcomes’ (p. 334).

3. Inclusion and teacher professional development

In exploring the relationship between inclusion and teacher professional development, we adopt a broad definition of teacher professional development to include both formal (e.g. formal special education qualifications; traditional ‘PD’ programs/workshops) and informal modes of learning (e.g. including learning from and with colleagues, and more ‘lifelong learning’ approaches (Muijs, Day, Harris, & Lindsay, 2004; Hardy, 2012)). Teacher professional development is not simply limited to the sorts of experiences typically associated with teacher ‘PD’ (such as ‘one-off’ workshops), but also a product of the learning practices that occur as part of teachers’ work in schooling settings more broadly.

In their review of professional development research for inclusive education during the first decade of the 2000s, Waitoller and Artiles (2013) referred to three broad ways of defining inclusive education in the literature. These related to: ability differences; curricular changes pertaining to gender and cultural differences, and; ways of addressing engagement and learning for all students. Importantly, Waitoller and Artiles (2013) argue that the majority of PD research (70% of the studies to which they referred) understands inclusion in relation to students with disabilities, students at risk, or students with learning difficulties. This is in keeping with how much of the professional development literature, and literature on ‘inclusion’ more generally, conflates issues of special education with inclusion.

3.1. The dominance of special education in professional development pertaining to discourses of inclusion

On many occasions, inclusion is largely seen as relating to including students with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), often within what is understood as a ‘mainstream’ classroom (Woodcock & Hardy, 2016). This is evident in research across international contexts, and within national jurisdictions. A review of literature by de Boer et al. (2011) focusing on case studies of ‘regular’ elementary school teachers’ beliefs towards inclusive education around the world, emphasized students with SEND. International research draws upon teachers’ prior knowledge, attitudes and beliefs in relation to teaching students with SEND, to reveal how teachers’ PD experiences leave them inadequately prepared to engage these students inclusively in their classrooms (Symeonidou and Phtiaka, 2009).

This tendency to conflate issues of inclusion with special education is also evident in how so much of the literature in specific national contexts refers explicitly to teachers’ acquisition of formal special educational qualifications as a key part of their learning. This focus on disabilities is evident in how the influence of teaching experience and professional development on Greek teachers’ beliefs towards inclusion are based not on a broad conception of inclusion, but inclusion as ‘accommodating different types of disabilities in mainstream classrooms’ (Avramidis & Kalyva’s, 2007, p. 367). Also, traditional approaches to teachers’ PD may not lead to productive changes to teachers’ beliefs towards inclusive education more broadly, because the PD courses are seen to reinforce common perceptions of inclusive education as pertaining

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