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RESEARCH REVIEW

Elizabeth Foster

STUDY EXAMINES TEACHERS' SELF-EFFICACY AND BELIEFS IN INCLUSION

Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning call for professional learning that "results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students" (Learning Forward, 2022). The "all" part of that vision is woven throughout the 11 standards. For example, the **Equity Practices** standard encourages the development of classrooms where educators "create high-quality learning experiences for all students, honoring all aspects of identity students bring to the school" and "learn to recognize each student's strengths and personalize learning to maximize impact on a range of student outcomes" (Learning Forward, 2022).



To achieve this vision, it is important to understand how educators develop the mindsets and practices that prioritize every student's access to relevant and meaningful learning experiences. A recent Australian study contributed to that understanding by examining the relationship between teachers' beliefs in inclusive education and their levels of teaching self-efficacy, which previous research finds is correlated with more effective teaching practices. The researchers explain that Australia's approach to inclusive education comprises policies and structures that support "teaching practices that benefit all learners in response to a student's identity, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and disability." (They use the terms inclusive education and inclusion interchangeably.) Whereas inclusion in the United States usually refers to placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms, in Australia, inclusion is a more holistic approach that recognizes a broader diversity of student strengths and needs and applies to all. This broad definition can result in variations in implementation at the school and classroom levels, resulting in a lack of clarity for teachers and concerns about their ability and efficacy to implement inclusive practices.

Given this variation, the researchers sought to understand the extent to which teachers' beliefs about the effectiveness of teaching all students in an inclusive classroom and their beliefs about their own ability to teach all students contribute to their teaching practices.

The study builds on the literature about self-efficacy, particularly how the interaction of beliefs, environment, and behavior influence teachers' actions, effort, persistence, expectations, and classroom practice (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Teachers who have higher self-efficacy have been shown to be more persistent, more able to adjust teaching strategies, and more confident in their ability to positively impact students' learning and achievement. Teachers with low self-efficacy may feel they can only teach certain students, may use low-impact instructional strategies, or may not adjust for students achieving at different levels. These beliefs impact teachers' planning, lesson design, formative assessments, and responses to challenges in the classroom.

► THE STUDY

Woodcock, S., Gibbs, K., Hitches, E., & Regan, C. (2023, March 6). Investigating teachers' beliefs in inclusive education and their levels of teacher self-efficacy: Are teachers constrained in their capacity to implement inclusive teaching practices? *Education Sciences*, 13(3), 280.

► METHODOLOGY

The study involved 208 teachers in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, from 15 primary and 15 secondary schools that were chosen randomly. Participating teachers were 25% male and 72% female (3% chose not to state their gender); were from a range of age groups; and had a diverse range of experience (5% had been teaching for less than three years; 10% between three and five years; 27% between six and 10 years; 18% between 11 and 20 years; and 40% had been teaching for more than 20 years).

Teachers were administered a three-part survey, beginning with demographic questions. The second part consisted of the Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale: 12 statements of teachers' beliefs in their capabilities to engage all students in learning with a Likert scale of 0 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal) (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). The items were grouped into three categories — student engagement, classroom management, and instructional strategies — and included questions such as: How much can you do to motivate students who show low interest in school work? How much can you do to control disruptive behavior in the classroom? How well can you implement alternative strategies in your classroom? The greater the participant's score, the higher the level of teacher self-efficacy. The third part of the survey included questions about teachers' perceptions of inclusive education, including one that asked teachers if they believed that an inclusive classroom is an effective way to teach all students.

► FINDINGS

Overall, teachers who believed in the effectiveness of inclusive education showed higher levels of teacher self-efficacy than those who did not, including a higher belief in their abilities to engage and motivate students, help them value learning and believe they can do well, and engage with families. They also held a higher belief in their capabilities “to

instruct students by implementing alternative teaching strategies, providing alternative explanations, developing good questions for students, and using a variety of assessment strategies” (p. 7). These teachers also showed higher self-efficacy in their abilities to manage their classroom and student behaviors.

The study also looked at whether there were relationships between teachers' age and experience levels and their self-efficacy and belief in the value of inclusion. Tests showed there were significant (although small) correlations between teachers' experiences and their level of teacher self-efficacy: the more years of teaching experience, the higher the level of teacher self-efficacy in engaging students and in instructional strategies (but not in managing the classroom). There were no significant correlations between teachers' age and their self-efficacy, but teachers who were older generally reported less belief in the effectiveness of inclusion.

This correlational study was not able to look at whether the relationship between self-efficacy and valuing of inclusion are causally related. The researchers also acknowledge that observations of classroom teaching and some measure of student outcomes would add further dimension to this kind of study since these findings are based on teachers' self-reports about both belief in inclusion as a strategy to teach all students and indicators of self-efficacy.

► IMPLICATIONS

This study suggests that professional learning needs to both address the value of inclusion and build teachers' skills and therefore sense of self-efficacy in implementing effective teaching strategies. Making these connections explicit is important because, as the **Learning Designs** standard states, “Educators design professional learning that achieves improved leader, teacher, and student outcomes by understanding and articulating how the learning will lead to the intended changes” (Learning Forward, 2022, p. 44). Directly

addressing the purposes and goals of the inclusive strategy to engage students of all backgrounds and abilities could contribute to increasing teachers' self-efficacy, especially among older teachers who may not have had the opportunity to work or learn in inclusive settings over the course of their career.

This sort of intentional professional learning that supports teachers to examine and shift their beliefs speaks to the **Equity Drivers** standard, which calls on teachers to “learn about the beliefs and practices that support equitable learning, develop their understanding of the vision for equity in their school or system, and build their capacity to examine their own practices related to equity” (Learning Forward, 2002, p. 34). Professional learning that supports older teachers' beliefs in inclusion may also have a ripple effect on younger teachers, especially if the older teachers are serving in a mentor role, formally or informally.

This study is an example of learning from a variety of education contexts. The Australian approach to inclusion emphasizes the importance of teachers recognizing the unique strengths and needs of each student and thereby creating an environment of belonging for all students. The expansiveness of the concept of inclusion in this study goes beyond including students with disabilities in a general education setting to an emphasis on making all students feel understood and welcomed into the learning environment. Going beyond the presence or accommodation of students with differing abilities gets closer to the goal of excellent and equitable educational opportunities for all students.

REFERENCES

- Learning Forward. (2022).** *Standards for Professional Learning*. Author.
- Tschannen-Moran, M. & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2001, October).** Teacher efficacy: Capturing an elusive construct. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 17*(7), 783-805. ■