

# Beginning teacher preparation and readiness for the profession as inclusive educators

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**Abstract:** *In this study, we investigated the perceptions of beginning teachers regarding their preparation for becoming inclusive educators. Our aim was to explore what they considered facilitators and barriers to becoming inclusive educators upon transitioning into the profession. The research was informed by the three apprenticeships model encompassing the cognitive, practical and moral dimensions of teaching that is the knowledge, skills and beliefs required to practice as an inclusive educator. We collected interview data from eight beginning teachers who transitioned into the profession in 2020 or 2021 and undertook a thematic analysis of these conversations. Our analysis identified that beginning teachers perceived that their teacher education at university did not prepare them sufficiently with 1. Strong professional inclusive education terminology and knowledge; 2. Practical and evidence-based skills for instruction and assessment; or 3. The opportunity to work with people with disabilities in inclusive contexts in order to become effective inclusive educators across all three domains. Findings are discussed and future directions for research are outlined.*

**Keywords:** *Inclusive educators, Teacher preparation, High-quality education*

## 1. Introduction

In the past half century, there have been global efforts to improve equitable access to quality schooling in recognition of education both as a fundamental right and an enabler of other rights (United Nations, 1948). These global initiatives have sought to address children experiencing poor access to quality education (United Nations, 2015; United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2015a; 2015b; United Nations Foundation, 2015), and promote inclusive education (Johnstone et al., 2020). While these initiatives have led to some improvements in access to a quality education for particular marginalised groups, progress has been slow (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2015). Moreover, the minimal progress for children with disability has led to separate and targeted reform efforts (de Bruin, 2022) and culminated in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD; United Nations, 2008).

The right to education is elucidated as the right to an inclusive education within General Comment 4 on Article 24 of the CRPD (United Nations, 2016) in recognition of persistent discrimination in, and exclusion from, education experienced by students with disability. Inclusive education is precisely defined in General Comment 4 and clarifies the obligation placed on signatories to the CRPD to ensure students are provided with an accessible and high-quality education, with appropriate accommodations (termed reasonable adjustments here in Australia) within the regular school system, as well as the

obligation to ensure teachers receive the training to provide inclusive learning environments (United Nations, 2016; para 12). The United Nations emphasises that teacher professional preparation should provide with a baseline of core values and competencies from which to develop their skills as they become more experienced and skilled. Globally, professional standards for teachers are established with the intention of augmenting teacher quality and student outcomes (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2000). Within Australia, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2017) were developed to enhance teaching standards and maximise student learning (Timperley, 2011). This obliges Australian universities to align their initial teacher education (ITE) with the APST and to ensure preservice teachers are well prepared (Call, 2018).

## **2. Rationale for the study**

This research focusses on beginning teachers' perceptions of their preparation to implement inclusive practices for students with disability in Australia which has ratified the CRPD, placing it under binding obligations. The aim of our study was to build on existing research in light of current standards-based contexts. We sought answers to two research questions. The first: What are the perceptions of beginning teachers in regard to how their ITE enabled them to address the APST and facilitate their development as an inclusive educator? The second: What barriers did the beginning teachers' encounter and/or overcome in the transition to teaching that they feel their ITE could have better prepared them for? While this paper is about beginning classroom teachers, and builds on existing research, we were specifically focussing on beginning teachers who are classroom teachers, have graduated from teacher education university courses, and are in their first year of teaching.

### ***2.1. The legislative and policy context within Australia***

In Australia, the Disability Discrimination Act, 1992 (DDA) and the Disability Standards for Education, 2005 (DSE) outline the legal mandates requiring schools and teachers to provide reasonable adjustments for students with disability. The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on School Students with Disability (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2022) reports that 22.5% of school students have a disability requiring these adjustments, making them the largest minority group in the education system. This makes the preparation of teachers to include and support them a pressing issue, particularly given that this has historically been, and remains, variable and inconsistent (Poed et al., 2022).

Repeated calls have been made for improvements to the professional preparation and ongoing learning of teachers (e.g. see de Bruin, 2020; de Bruin, 2021) and to ensure clarity in schools regarding how students' entitlements are upheld. For example, while the mandated Australian Curriculum provides guidance for teachers to meet the diverse learning needs of students (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [ACARA], 2016), the curriculum only articulates content and performance standards without reference to how these are taught and assessed. Interpreting legislation and policies, and implementing inclusive practices can thus be a daunting challenge in the face of everyday teaching for experienced teachers (Anderson & Boyle, 2015); for beginning teachers, these responsibilities can appear insurmountable (McKay, 2016; Miles & Knipe, 2018) if they are not adequately prepared professionally.

Many researchers report that beginning teachers when transitioning into the profession are optimistic about the challenge before them and provide inclusive learning opportunities (McKay, 2016; McKay et al., 2014; Papatraianou et al., 2018). However, beginning teachers report feeling unsure and

unprepared in knowing how to proactively support all students academically and behaviourally (Miles & Knipe, 2018; Serry et al., 2022). Research regarding preservice teachers' perspectives on inclusion and their preparation and readiness to practice as inclusive educators is extensive (Goddard & Evans, 2018; Hopkins et al., 2018; Mergler et al., 2017; Sharma & Nuttal, 2016; Subban & Mahlo, 2017; Varcoe & Boyle, 2014). Specific reference to the dilemmas beginning teachers' encounter and experiences faced when transitioning into the profession as inclusive educators do not appear in the considerable research that has taken place to date (McKay, 2016). To address this gap, we sought to understand their perception of their preparation within ITE and identify what they consider are facilitators and barriers to becoming inclusive educators when transitioning into the profession.

## ***2.2. Preparing Australian teachers to become inclusive practitioners***

A wealth of research reinforces that ITE should foster the beliefs, rationale and practical knowledge of inclusive education, for it to effectively occur (Rouse, 2008; Sharma & Nuttal, 2016). It is vital that evidence-based content regarding appropriate planning, implementation and understanding of reasonable adjustments under the DSE takes place within ITE to ensure high-quality inclusive practices that support every student without exception are taking place (de Bruin, 2020, 2021). Understanding the knowledge and beliefs for inclusive teaching, and the practical preparation of teachers to implement it within the classroom, is key. For example, Mergler et al. (2017) found that pre-service teacher attitudes, knowledge and skills in teaching as an inclusive educator are significantly influenced by exposure to inclusive education units along with practical experiences that familiarise the pre-service teacher to working with people with diverse learning and behavioural needs (Hopkins et al., 2018; Sharma & Nuttal, 2016). Varcoe and Boyle (2014) concur that inclusive education units, coupled with practical experience are of considerable value due to the increase that they bring about in pre-service teacher self-assurance, skilled competence and belief in inclusive education.

Concerns remain about what is taught in the name of inclusive education. These concerns include the adequacy of ITE frameworks for developing pre-service teachers' skills and strategies (Subban & Mahlo 2017), their preparation to teach and differentiate for diversity (Serry et al., 2022) and their understanding of the DSE standards, particularly students' rights and their obligations under the standards (de Bruin, 2021). Some research suggests that this preparation can influence whether teachers chose to stay in the profession (Kelly et al., 2019) highlighting the importance of ITE programs to enhance pre-service teachers' knowledge and understanding of obligation under the DSE to meet the diverse learning and behavioural needs of all students.

## ***2.3. Positioning and framing the study***

We took a phenomenological approach to address the research questions in order to explore the viewpoint of the person who is going through and has gone through experiencing the phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004; Neubauer et al., 2019). This meant exploring the perspectives of a small group of early-career teachers' views to elicit their insights, and understanding participants' experience of the phenomenon of transition, as well as their feelings and beliefs about what took place during this time, and how their ITE influenced their perceptions (Groenewald, 2004). Data was collected through interviews that focused on: the context the participants worked in; their understanding of and experience practicing as an inclusive educator; and the education provided, and strategies employed when teaching students with diverse learning needs.

## ***2.4. Theoretical framework***

Our study employed Shulman's (2004) three apprenticeships as a framework for examining and analysing the essential elements required when introducing and educating people in any profession and followed the adaptation of Rouse (2008) in application to ITE and inclusive education. The three apprenticeships referred to are: 1. The apprenticeship of the head – cognitive understanding and theoretical foundation; 2. The apprenticeship of the hand – skills required to carry out technical and practical tasks; and 3. The apprenticeship of the heart – the moral and ethical aspects, the beliefs and viewpoints vital to the profession (Rouse, 2008). These key concepts were used to drive the analysis and reporting for this research project and to suggest the domains of improvement in the conclusion also.

### **3. Methodology**

We used a priori purposive sampling approach to identify beginning teachers who had transitioned into the profession in 2020 or 2021. Three participants were recruited through the first author's professional networks and five participants were recruited via Facebook. Participants provided demographic information including their gender, initial teacher education, primary or secondary school type, government or non-government schools and diverse geographic locations. Of the eight participants selected, three identified as male and five as female. Five participants completed a Bachelor of Early Childhood or Education, while three participants completed the Master of Teaching. Five participants taught in a primary school, two participants taught in a high school and one participant taught in both high school and primary school. A government school context was the setting for six of the participants, while one participant taught in a Catholic school and one participant taught in both an independent and government school. In each school the participants worked in, the enrolment ranged from 150 to 2000 students. At the time the participants were interviewed, six participants taught in a capital city, one in a regional school and one in a rural school. The participants reside and work in three Australian states, (Victoria, New South Wales or Queensland). Pseudonyms, as per their ethical consent, were used to de-identify participants Josh, Levi, Philip, Anne, Daphne, Brianna, Riley and Jane.

Ethics approval for the research was sought and given from Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (Ethics approval number: 26689). Once ethical clearance was given, participants were emailed an initial letter with the explanatory statement and consent form. When the completed consent form was received, confirming that the participant agreed to partake in the study, additional communication was made to arrange a day for the semi-structured interview to occur. A one-to-one semi-structured interview took place and was recorded via Zoom with eight participants to understand their perceptions of a situation, and therefore their construction of reality (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Each interview went for no longer than 50 min. A verbatim transcription of the interview was sent to each participant with their pseudonym included after the interview took place to confirm they agreed with what have been recorded in the transcript.

We employed a hybrid approach to analyse the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This entailed firstly employing an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) where patterns were identified and reported on, with processes for establishing credibility and trustworthiness drawn from a case study by McKay et al. (2014). The process began with transcribing each interview. Any aspect of the transcription related to the participant's ITE experience was extracted. This data between the eight participants was then compared via conceptual mapping which formed the basis by which initial themes were distinguished (Nowell et al., 2017). Some initial themes such as previous work experience, working with students with disabilities appeared irrelevant in addressing the research question, but as

suggested by Nowell et al. (2017), caution was applied before removing them due to the potential of emergent sub-themes. As the process continued, concrete themes and subthemes were identified when concepts were linked to segments of the data and formed a pattern that enabled the research questions to be addressed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

Following this, a deductive reasoning approach (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) was used to conceptually map the identified themes in relation to the three apprenticeships – head, hand and heart (Rouse, 2008) which were used as a priori codes and applied to sort the themes identified in the inductive analysis. The three apprenticeships as theoretical framework recognises the importance of each element being included in ITE so that a deep understanding, skillset and belief in inclusive practice is established within the beginning teacher. When a foundation such as this is evident in ITE the focus for beginning teachers is no longer about variances amongst learners but rather learning for all (Rouse, 2008). The influence ITE preparation had on each beginning teacher's experience as an inclusive educator, with reference to the theoretical framework is expressed in the accounts of the participants as follows.

#### **4. Findings**

In this section, we report on the findings revealed from our analysis of the interviews. The themes we identified are described using the overarching concepts of the three apprenticeships – head, hand and heart (Rouse, 2008). We then provide a discussion of our findings relevant to the research questions by bringing together the theoretical framework, the findings from the data analysis, and the extant literature referred to in the introduction.

In relation to this theme, participants raised topics and issues relating to key terms and concepts in inclusive education. These are outlined below.

Each participant's preparation as an inclusive educator at their university included the concept of differentiated instruction, however, there was a consistent theme across participants that this was not done with sufficient depth or clarity regarding the implications for implementation. Josh shared that learning about differentiation 'was definitely present in every ... unit that I did'. Brianna agreed stating 'differentiation definitely ... yes, definitely able to implement it'. In contrast, however, Levi struggled to confirm whether or not he partook in a unit on diversity training and stated, 'I think I just had one unit, and I don't remember'. Riley said she 'vaguely remembers ... one assignment that gets you to outline two scenarios of students with disabilities ... how would you adjust this lesson plan to fit that ... that's all I remember'. Philip testified 'I don't know maybe I am doing them [university] a disservice ... but not to my memory was there anything significant'. Even though Anne, Brianna, Riley and Jane went to separate universities, they maintained that differentiation was taught mainly with reference to lesson plans. From their perspective, the approach was broad, and practical strategies non-existent. Daphne made comment that learning about differentiation 'comes across more tokenistic ... not really given time or consideration'. Anne said 'it [differentiation] wasn't specified, it was a very generic almost an additional column tick thing ... not extensive no'.

Moreover, participants in this study indicated that their ITE courses did not teach them about the distinction between differentiated instruction and modification or the appropriateness of using these with students. Differentiated teaching occurs when adaptations are incorporated into the design of instruction and assessment to ensure all students are able to access the curriculum and to meet learning objectives that are aligned with grade-level expectations (Roy et al., 2013). By contrast, modification takes place when individual students are held to a lower curriculum achievement or performance standard than their same-age peers (Ketterlin-Geller & Jamgochian, 2011). These concepts to Josh and

Jane, although different, were thought congruent. For example, Josh identified that at university they were taught to differentiate by adjusting curriculum expectations for a year below, at level, and at a year above. Josh reflected by saying, 'so I think that was a shock in the sense that I was taught to differentiate this narrow range and now suddenly you're faced in the classroom with this massive range'. Jane also testified, 'so differentiation [at university] was you've got your high, your medium and your low kids ... it wasn't your kids who are going to be on those new individual plans and one or two years below'.

Participants indicated that they considered they were not sufficiently taught about both national- and state-based policies that are mandated for implementation in schools. For example, Josh and Riley shared that they had little to no idea about the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD), a national census that counts how many students receive adjustments under the DDA, 1992 and the DSE, 2005. Josh expressed how problematic this lack of knowledge was:

Similarly, Riley wished her university had introduced her to include PLaSP – Personalised Learning and Support Plan – which recognise New South Wales (NSW) requirements needed to support the education of students in out of home care (NSW Government, Communities & Justice, 2023a); and PLPs – Personal Learning Pathways – a NSW strategy employed to enhance engagement in education for Aboriginal students (NSW Government, Communities & Justice, 2023b). She said, 'the uni doesn't prepare you to go out and say ... can I see this student's PLaSP? You don't even know that they've got one. You don't ... hear anything about PLaSP, behaviour learning support, PLPs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students ... I didn't know they existed ... I didn't even know where to find them'. This lack of knowledge in responsibilities under legislation and policy was identified as a barrier to teaching as an inclusive educator from the university setting because these beginning teachers were unaware of the administration expectations required and support plans that potentially would enable them to have a better understanding of the students with disabilities in their class.

In relation to this theme, the beginning teachers interviewed shared the challenges encountered in ITE regarding learning how to implement effective classroom practices to support students with disabilities. This is discussed as follows.

When it came to learning about classroom practices for supporting students with disabilities in ITE Anne, Daphne, Brianna, Riley and Jane expressed suitable approaches to support students with disability in the classroom context was not apparent either. Daphne did complete the elective inclusive education subjects which were positive. Her concern, however, was that these subjects were optional, as without them, her ITE lacked sufficient depth and detail to practice as an inclusive educator. Jane voiced similar concerns saying 'it wasn't strategies to use in the classroom or how you could approach, you know, working with those kids for the first time'. A similar point was made by Philip stating, 'considering how big it [teaching students with disabilities] can be in your teaching, like you can really almost be the central thing in your teaching ahh yeah definitely don't feel prepared for it'. Six out of the eight participants made a point of saying that they would have appreciated being provided with a deeper understanding, knowledge and strategies of how to work and support students with disabilities in ITE that is 'classroom real life based', as expressed by Anne, to feel better prepared not only as a beginning teacher but an inclusive educator.

In line with this theme, participants divulged previous work experience that involved working with students with disabilities, outside of ITE, enhanced their confidence and perspective towards inclusion. This is expanded on below.

Our analysis of the narratives reveals it was beginning teachers' experiences in professional work outside university, in a related field that influenced their confidence, attitudes and belief in their ability to teach students with disabilities, rather than content taught at university. Levi, Philip, Anne, Daphne, Brianna and Riley articulated their heavy reliance on their previous work experience in knowing how to support and implement reasonable adjustments for those students with disabilities in their classes. Prior to graduating, Levi, Anne and Daphne worked in educational contexts in varied roles such as a teacher-aide and supporting children with disabilities. As a beginning teacher, they found this experience most valuable and readily implemented strategies learnt during this time in the classroom context. Anne felt she was 'hugely' reliant on her previous experience. Daphne testified if she had not had her previous experience prior to starting to teach she 'probably would have quit completely ... but I could fall back on things I had already done previously ... because I had that experience, I was able to fall back on those skills and the different strategies'.

Daphne, Brianna and Riley tutored students with learning difficulties while at university and each expressed how this experience definitely enhanced their confidence and ability to understand and determine reasonable adjustments in the classroom context for students with disabilities. Prior to becoming a teacher Philip worked in the after-school care and vacation care sector. Philip consistently encountered challenging situations in this context, due to the diverse behavioural needs of the students in the program. He said, 'they had quite a few students with autism or additional needs while I was working in that space, so that sort of gave me more hands-on experience ... than actual university or placement did'. While difficult at times, Philip saw this experience as beneficial and self-assuring when transitioning into the profession as an inclusive educator. Strategies learnt during previous work experience with students with disabilities was considered by participants as most beneficial when transitioning into the profession. These experiences enhanced positive attitudes towards working with students with disabilities and thus facilitated and promoted inclusive practice even though it was not directly connected to ITE.

## **5. Conclusions and recommendations**

The narratives presented in this paper provide a glimpse into the experiences of beginning teachers' transition into the profession as inclusive educators. The perspectives of this small group of early career teachers suggest that little appears to have changed despite the findings recommendations of previous research outlined above, and despite the introduction of the APST, with much work remaining to ensure adequate preparation of teachers to educate students with disability. While these beginning teachers recognised their role as an inclusive educator was not something mastered overnight nor at the conclusion of their qualification, but was ongoing, they collectively felt unprepared from the start.

Our study highlights the potential of Rouse's (2008) adaptation of the three apprenticeships framework to examine beginning teachers' transition to becoming inclusive educators. The participants reported shock and surprise at the disparity between what was taught at university, and the beliefs and competencies required to meet their obligations under both national and state-level legislation and policy. In response to these findings, three domains of improvement offered a structure to suggest how universities might augment current ITE practices. The first is ensuring that ITE students graduate with strong professional knowledge regarding inclusive education terminology and concepts taught in conjunction with research evidence (head). The second is that ITE courses include compulsory inclusive education units teaching practical and evidence-based practices for instruction and assessment (hand). The third is that these units are accompanied by professional placement experiences that

involve working with people with disabilities in inclusive environments (heart).

The perspectives of beginning teachers in this small study indicate possible directions for ITE improvement in preparing graduates for implementing inclusive education. Firstly, ITE should contain mandated content for inclusive practice given that the current approach described by participants did not leave them sufficiently equipped to meet their professional obligations. Secondly, practical experience in working with people with disabilities should be included within ITE given our finding that this increased beginning teachers' beliefs, knowledge and skills. While small in scale, the consistency of our findings with previous research indicates that more needs to be done to prepare graduate teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms. The importance of this is clear, with General Comment 4 on Article 24 of the CRPD (United Nations, 2016) highlighting the work of teachers, including beginning teachers, plays an important role in turning the tide of disability discrimination and making the United Nations dream of a peaceful and just society into a reality.

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