

Chapter 11

Inclusive Education in Australia: An Unfolding Reform



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Abstract In Australia, inclusive education is on the agenda of all state governments, with calls being made for genuine reform throughout all school systems. Despite the maintenance of segregated schools and classes for students with certain forms of special educational needs (SEN) or disability in some states and territories, the inclusion movement is supported by a growing assortment of legislation, policies, and guiding documents. As education in this country is primarily a state responsibility, the move towards inclusive schooling for students with SEN varies considerably according to local socio-political, historical, and geographical contexts. Given these circumstances, many mainstream teachers are experiencing difficulties in providing quality education for all students, including those with complex learning needs. A scoping review of the Australian literature related to inclusive education reveals that research to date has predominately focused on investigating teachers' attitudes and beliefs about inclusion and their professional preparation for working in inclusive settings. Inquiries into effective inclusive pedagogies for classroom use are now emerging, albeit slowly. A case study of practices at a local urban primary (elementary) school illustrates current efforts being used to advance inclusive education in that setting. At the moment, several key challenges need to be overcome for students with SEN to be successful learners in Australian mainstream schools. Strong, collaborative commitment and action by governments are needed to drive the inclusive education agenda forward in this country.

Keywords Australia · Inclusion · Inclusive education · Policies · Teacher education · Teacher practice

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Introduction

The island continent of Australia, informally referred to as the *Land Down Under*, is the world's sixth largest country with a total area of 7.69 million km² distributed across eight states and territories. Despite its large area, Australia's relatively small but multicultural population of 25.73 million live chiefly in urban areas around major cities along the eastern and south-eastern coastline. Statistics indicate that 90% of the population occupies only 0.29% of the land area, and 85% lives within 50 km of the coast (Cox, 2018; Daley et al., 2017) with the other 10% living inland in rural and outback remote areas.

The structure of the education system is similar throughout Australia and operates across three distinct sectors (government, Catholic, and independent). Compulsory until at least the age of 16, education at mainstream and special schools extends from primary (kindergarten/preparatory through to year 6) to secondary (year 7 through to year 12). Learning environments, however, differ substantially across metropolitan, regional, and remote settings. Large city schools may have over 2000 students, while small outback schools may have only 20 students. In remote areas students receive distance education and School of the Air.

Currently, just under four million students across all school sectors in Australia access educational services. In 2018, 7.7% of students under age 15 were reported to have a disability, with 69% of those between ages 5 and 14 being educated within inclusive classrooms in mainstream primary and secondary schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The quality and effectiveness of inclusive schooling for these students vary according to individual state government priorities and funding models, together with historical patterns of service delivery for particular student groups in each state and geographic constraints on educational choices.

Within this chapter, the term *students with special educational needs* (SEN) is used to describe students who experience substantial difficulty in the areas of learning and adjustment compared to same-aged peers (Westwood, 2015). Students with SEN therefore include those with verifiable disabilities, learning difficulties, and communication, emotional, and behavioural disorders. This interpretation has a goodness of fit with the Australian government's broad definition of a disability, which includes physical and intellectual disability, acquired brain injury, autism, health conditions, mental health disorders, hearing and vision impairment, and specific learning disability.

Legislation, Policies, and Guiding Documents

As an early signatory to the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (UNESCO, 1994), the Australian government agreed to support Article 2, which called for students with SEN to be educated within local, mainstream schools. Since that time, momentum and support for inclusive education

in this country have slowly intensified. In part, this incremental progress has been influenced by inclusive education being couched in state policies and not federal law. At the federation of the Commonwealth in 1901, the states and territories were given responsibility for school-age students and their education under the Australian Constitution. State governments have continued to exert their autonomous control of schooling through their individual education acts, political agendas, and interpretations of inclusive education and students with disabilities. Nonetheless, the Australian government has continued to action education-related reforms in its areas of responsibility, including disability, teaching quality, and parental engagement.

National Level

Strong legislative support for educating students with disabilities in Australia can be traced back to the ratification of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC; United Nations, 1989) and the enactment of the *Disability Discrimination Act* (DDA; Australian Government, 1992). While the CRC affirmed that every child had the right to an education, the DDA not only made it illegal to discriminate against students on the basis of their disability but also gave parents the choice to enrol their child with a disability in a mainstream or special school. It also required the relevant school authority to put forward a case using the “controversial unjustifiable hardship exemption” (Dickson, 2006, p. 25) should it refuse such an admission.

The subsequent enactment of the *Disability Standards for Education* (DSfE; Australian Government, 2005) strengthened the scope of the DDA through targeted elaboration on the roles and responsibilities of school authorities to provide quality education to students with disability at all school levels (preschool to university) and across the three education sectors. The *Educational Standards* cover five key areas: enrolment; participation; curriculum development, accreditation, and delivery; student support services; and harassment and victimisation. In each area, the rights of students with disabilities are stipulated, together with examples of the steps that must be taken by education authorities to comply with the specified standard. Importantly, DSfE provides clear legislative support for students with disabilities to be included in mainstream classrooms through the use of “reasonable adjustments”. Moreover, DSfE indicates that adjustments should be planned through consultation with the student and/or the family. For many students, these adjustments are specified within what is termed an individual education plan (IEP), individual curriculum plan, or personalised learning plan. In general, adjustments are made in relation to classrooms and surrounding environments, curriculum and assessment, and teaching materials and instruction, together with any necessary access to specialist support (e.g. speech pathologist, advisory personnel).

The Education Standards are reviewed every 5 years, with the 2010 review identifying several issues including that “the obligations and requirements under

the Education Standards lack strong accountability frameworks” (Foreman, 2015, p. 12). One reform put in place to increase accountability was the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD)—a nation-wide process in which data are collected annually for school-age students with disability who are receiving adjustments. In 2017, the NCCD process began in all schools, and since 2018 disability funding provided by the Australian government to educational authorities has been based on the NCCD data. The data gathering process is rigorous, with teachers and school teams undertaking specified activities across four phases: (1) planning for the NCCD; (2) implementing the NCCD model to detect if students are receiving adjustments due to disability; (3) validating the adjustment, determining the level of the adjustment (either quality differentiated teaching practice, supplementary, substantial, or extensive) according to guidelines, and providing evidence to support decisions; and (4) reflecting on the NCCD experience to identify how school practices and processes can be improved. Communication with parents is built into the preparation and validation phases.

Two other important educational reforms influencing the education of students with SEN or disability were founded around the same time as the rollout of NCCD—the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2014) and the national Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2016). Both reforms drew support from the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008), with its two overarching goals that placed demands on Australian education systems to provide equity and excellence in schooling for all students so that they can develop into confident, capable, and informed citizens.

Funded by the Australian government, the Professional Standards were developed by AITSL in collaboration with teacher accreditation and registration authorities, education systems, and professional associations to provide consistency in teacher quality across the country. Seven standards are specified, describing what teachers should know and be capable of doing across four career stages (graduate, proficient, highly accomplished, and lead). At each stage, the Standards make explicit the elements of high-quality teaching across the domains of professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional engagement. Importantly, these Standards require all Australian teachers to be capable of providing inclusive education programmes (e.g. differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of all students; support full participation of students with disability). In a similar fashion, ACARA was funded by the Australian government and all state and territory governments to develop and sequentially make available a consistent and mandated curriculum for all students from kindergarten to year 12. From its inception, however, there have been ongoing concerns about its capacity to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities and SEN (see, e.g. Anderson & Boyle, 2019; Berlach & Chambers, 2011).

State Level

As indicated previously, a peculiar arrangement for education provision exists in Australia, with the six states and two territories independently providing legislation and policy on inclusive education. This arrangement has led to a myriad of disparate regulations, policy frameworks, implementation guidelines, and monitoring strategies, together with substantial inconsistencies in defining students with disabilities and in interpreting fundamental concepts related to inclusivity and inclusive education (Anderson & Boyle, 2019; Berlach & Chambers, 2011; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). A targeted search for policy-related documents and student disability criteria for funding across departmental websites confirmed this situation.

Findings in relation to documents related to inclusive education showed that six of the eight jurisdictions had disability-focused policies, strategy frameworks, or principles. Queensland and the Northern Territory were the only two with documents with a specific focus on inclusive education. In Queensland, the new *Inclusive Education Policy* states that “Inclusive education means that students can access and fully participate in learning, alongside their similar aged peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs” (Department of Education, Queensland Government, 2021, p. 1). Moreover, the policy provides definitions for integration, segregation, and exclusion in order to distinguish these practices from inclusive education. By comparison, the Northern Territory has put in place a *Framework for Inclusion 2019–29* (Department of Education, Northern Territory Government, 2019), which commits to building government schools that are “inclusive, fair, and focused on delivering learning to meet individual needs” (p. 4). The framework is grounded on eight inclusion principles, articulates a 10-year plan to be actioned in partnership with whole school communities, and includes three cycles of review and feedback, which culminate in a comprehensive 2029 evaluation.

Brief Review of Local Inclusion Research

A scoping review of the Australian literature related to inclusive education was undertaken to identify key themes and provide an overview of the type and quantity of local research in this area. A broad-sweep literature search of four databases (Sage, Taylor and Francis Online, Springer, and PsycInfo) was conducted using “inclusive education”, “special needs education”, and “primary and secondary schools” as key inclusion criteria. Key themes emerging from the review concerned teacher attitudes, beliefs, and efficacy in relation to inclusion; issues surrounding teacher preparation for working in inclusive settings; and inclusive pedagogies for classroom and schoolwide use.

Australian research into teacher attitudes and beliefs about inclusion has confirmed and elaborated on international findings that positive attitudes towards

inclusion facilitate successful teaching in inclusive classrooms and that teachers' perception of their efficacy to implement inclusive practices influences their attitudes (Forlin, 1995, 2006; Forlin et al., 2009; Sharma et al., 2007, 2012). This extensive body of research has explored factors influencing teacher attitudes and included a range of perspectives from classroom teachers in preschool, primary, and secondary years and from school leaders and pre-service teachers (Carrington & Kimber, 2020; Hoskin et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2007; Subban et al., 2021; Vaz et al., 2015). Factors contributing to positive teacher attitudes and improved confidence include specific training and experience in inclusive education, interaction with students with diverse learning needs, and knowledge of inclusive education policies (Forlin, 2001; Forlin et al., 2009; Garrad et al., 2019; Gigante & Gilmore, 2020; Hoskin et al., 2015; Loreman et al., 2013; Sharma et al., 2007).

Building on research into teacher attitudes and beliefs, Sharma et al. (2012) developed and validated the Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices scale (TEIP) with a large sample of pre-service teachers from countries across the Asia-Pacific region, including Australia, Hong Kong, and India. Since that time, the scale has been validated for use in countries including Saudi Arabia, Spain, Turkey, and Brazil (Tümekaya & Miller, 2020). A strong correlation between efficacy and attitudes is emerging from these studies, with teachers who are confident in their abilities to implement inclusive practices reporting positive attitudes towards inclusion. This relationship has been confirmed by studies which, in addition to reporting a correlation between teachers' perceptions of high efficacy and positive attitudes, highlights the need for targeted training and teacher professional development for inclusive education (Subban et al., 2021; Vaz et al., 2015).

Under the leadership of Forlin and Sharma, a considerable body of research spanning two decades has examined the impact and effectiveness of the preparation and training of teachers for inclusive education. Early research focusing on initial teacher education (ITE) programmes highlighted concerns that pre-service teachers were not being adequately prepared for inclusive education and recommended that teachers' knowledge and understanding of inclusion need to be informed by both theory and experience (Carroll et al., 2003). This recommendation has been supported by ongoing research into the impact of ITE on pre-service teachers' attitudes, concerns, and confidence. Studies in this area have reported that positive attitudes and efficacy are promoted by knowledge of principles of equity and equality policy, awareness of disability legislation relating to inclusive education, understanding various disabling conditions, and direct contact with students with SEN. Such direct contact is most valuable when pre-service teachers gain practical experience within inclusive classrooms and have opportunities to observe and reflect upon good practices and gain first-hand experience (e.g. Forlin et al., 2009; Lancaster & Bain, 2010; Sharma et al., 2007).

However, while much Australian research has confirmed that these recommendations improve attitudes and confidence, there have been continuing reservations regarding the effectiveness of ITE programmes, with calls for more research to address pre-service teachers' concerns about teaching students with disabilities and reduce potential stress (Forlin & Chambers, 2011). As current research continues to

indicate that pre-service teachers are not feeling adequately prepared to teach in inclusive settings (Costello & Boyle, 2013; Dally et al., 2019; Gigante & Gilmore, 2020), future empirical research is needed to examine how well ITE programmes prepare Australian pre-service teachers for inclusion (Hopkins et al., 2018). Moreover, strong university-school partnerships will be needed to ensure a cohesive transition of graduates from university to the inclusive classroom (Forlin & Chambers, 2011).

For many years, Forlin and colleagues have recommended that practising teachers, in addition to formal training, require professional learning in the form of mentoring and support by teachers with wide-ranging experience in inclusive education. Local research has continued to highlight the importance of authentic mentoring networks and the need for system-wide and long-term planning for professional development (Arthur-Kelly et al., 2013; Bentley-Williams et al., 2017). This research has been supported by the whole school approach, with regional consultants and school-based coaches facilitating collaboration and mentoring, building shared meanings, and contributing to the development of inclusive school communities (Abawi & Oliver, 2013; Bourke, 2009; Bristol, 2015; Forlin & Chambers, 2011).

There remains a critical need for Australian teachers to not only improve their theoretical understandings of inclusive education but also develop various pedagogies for instructing all students, including those with SEN (Boyle et al., 2011). In response to this need, local inquiries into effective inclusive pedagogies for classroom and schoolwide use are gradually emerging; however, to date the response has been limited. For example, only a handful of studies have been undertaken on the use of differentiated instruction in mainstream schools (Gibbs & Beamish, 2021; Jarvis et al., 2016, 2017; Monk et al., 2013; Sharp et al., 2020). Likewise, co-teaching has received only scant attention in ITE programmes (Yoo et al., 2019) and in disability studies in primary (Beamish et al., 2006) and secondary schools (Rice & Zigmund, 2000). While the qualitative nature of this research provides a focus on teacher perspectives and barriers to implementation, there remains a need for empirical research into the effectiveness of inclusive strategies in Australian classrooms. In an important contribution to empirical research into the effectiveness of pedagogies for inclusion, a team of Australian researchers has developed an observation tool to gather data in classroom settings (Finkelstein et al., 2021).

Teacher Preparation and Ongoing Professional Development

AITSL plays a pivotal role in leading and managing national reforms related to quality teaching and leadership (e.g. Professional Standards, teacher registration, accreditation ITE programmes, professional learning of teachers and school leaders, teacher performance and development, and school leadership development). Importantly, AITSL's charters and guidelines in these key areas assure some level of

consistency in teacher preparation, registration, and ongoing professional development across universities and employing education authorities in this country.

Pre-service Teacher Training

Initial teaching qualifications in Australia are obtained via either a 4-year Bachelor of Education or a 2-year Master's in Teaching for those with an undergraduate degree in another discipline. Additionally, pre-service teachers are offered an embedded specialisation in special needs education within their Bachelor's programme at universities in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, and Victoria. Regardless of the pathway, all ITE programmes must provide evidence that beginning teachers meet all Professional Standards at the graduate level for accreditation to be granted by AITSL and for teachers to gain registration. Hence, all graduating teachers must be able to demonstrate the skill set related to standards focused on the teaching of students across the full range of abilities and engaging professionally with colleagues. For this reason, universities routinely offer an inclusive education subject to ensure that essential content is covered. However, as noted in the previous section, ongoing research (e.g. Carroll et al., 2003; Forlin, 2006; Hopkins et al., 2018; Lancaster & Bain, 2010) continues to show that graduates are not adequately prepared to teach in inclusive schools.

In-Service Teacher Training and Professional Development

Likewise, the professional learning of practising teachers has been substantially influenced by two AITSL initiatives: the *Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders* (AITSL, 2012a) and the *Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework* (Revised; AITSL, 2018). The Charter defines professional learning as “the formal or informal learning experiences undertaken by teachers and school leaders that improve their individual practice, and a school's collective effectiveness, as measured by improved student learning, engagement with learning and wellbeing” (AITSL, 2012a, p. 2). Hence, professional learning is seen to be a shared responsibility between teachers and school administrators and includes undertaking both postgraduate studies at universities and professional learning activities (e.g. in-school workshops, face-to-face conferences, online webinars). Consistent with Professional Standard 6, *engage in professional learning*, every teacher must undertake a minimum of 100 hours of relevant and continuing professional development activities over a 5-year period to remain registered and can be audited by their respective state registration authority (AITSL, 2011). Moreover, every teacher is required to engage in a yearly performance review process, which involves the teacher generating, implementing, and

reviewing a performance and capability development plan, with ongoing feedback and guidance being provided by the school's leadership team (AITSL, 2012b).

Not surprisingly, some teachers view the completion of a postgraduate qualification as a viable option to meeting these requirements, with many Australian universities offering online Graduate Certificate and Master's programmes in special needs education and inclusive education. Specialised online programmes and subjects (e.g. gifted education, deaf education, autism studies) are available at a few dedicated universities. However, there is an increasing shortage of Australian teachers with a special education or special needs qualification to fill specialist positions in many education systems, and this situation is seeing unqualified teachers taking up these positions.

On the other hand, Australian teachers are well positioned to build their capabilities related to teaching students with SEN through a range of professional learning alternatives. They have access to several high-quality national and state conferences and forums with a varied focus (e.g. inclusive education, special needs, and disability-specific topics). Webinars and online workshops are increasingly popular, with some teachers preferring to participate in these activities when they are delivered by a recognised "expert speaker" in the area (Harper-Hill et al., 2022). Additionally, online networking communities such as the new *inclusion ED supporting diverse learners* (<https://www.inclusioned.edu.au>) are on the rise, as is in-school support to individual teachers and leadership teams by regional coaches in areas such as autism and inclusion.

Implementation of Inclusive Education in Schools

Schooling in Australia is characterised by some unique features and operating systems. As state and territory jurisdictions drive educational policy and practice, inclusive education is implemented in many different ways across jurisdictions and across sectors. However, a whole-school approach to teaching and learning through a three-tiered model of support is commonly used to promote inclusion and student outcomes. Additionally, differentiated instruction and explicit teaching and co-teaching are emerging research-informed practices being used in this country to provide more equitable learning opportunities to all students.

Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory specifically identify a whole-school approach to educational planning and instruction in their policy frameworks, whereas the remaining states restrict the whole-school approach to areas of student well-being and behaviour. In their online policies, the Department of Education in Western Australia (2009) indicates that "a whole school approach refers to cohesive, collective and collaborative action in and by a school community that has been strategically constructed to improve student learning, behaviour and wellbeing, and the conditions that support these". Adopted and adapted from US practice (see Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016), this approach to teaching and learning routinely uses a continuum of tiers to ensure

additional supports are in place for students who may require more targeted or personalised support while ensuring that all students work towards meeting year level curriculum expectations. Emphasis is first placed on effective instruction at Tier 1 level where the academic, social-emotional, and behavioural learning needs of the majority of students are met through effective explicit teaching and differentiated learning experiences provided to the whole class. Tier 2 level comprises supplementary, small group instruction and support for targeted students (including some with SEN) who are identified as not responding sufficiently to Tier 1 learning activities, while Tier 3 level is focused on delivering intensive intervention to individual students (including some with SEN).

With the increased number of students with SEN being educated in mainstream classrooms and the increased implementation of the whole-school approach, the working contexts of regular and special needs teachers have changed in recent times. Special needs teachers (also referred to as support teachers or inclusive education teachers) are now expected to be skilled operators who work alongside regular teachers with the expertise to accommodate the academic, social, and behavioural needs of all learners in mainstream classrooms (Forlin & Chambers, 2017). Collaboration—the positive interaction between regular and special needs teachers—affords collegial opportunities to work together to improve student learning outcomes and professional growth. The Professional Standards (AITSL, 2014) emphasise collaborative teaching partnerships, while state policies provide a range of collaborative approaches so that teachers can share their expertise for the benefit of every student (e.g. Department of Education, New South Wales Government, 2020).

High impact teaching strategies (HITS; Department of Education and Training, Victorian Government, 2019) are a recent innovation in Victorian classrooms and involve the use of specified, evidenced-based instructional strategies to improve student learning. These strategies include individualised goal setting, structuring lesson planning, explicit teaching, collaborative learning, metacognitive strategies, feedback, and differentiated teaching. Differentiated teaching and explicit instruction are becoming more widely used across states as teachers access conferences and workshops, featuring leading experts like Carol Ann Tomlinson (differentiated instruction) and Anita Archer (explicit instruction).

Differentiated instruction is responsive teaching as it is student-centred and uses a variety of research-informed strategies across curriculum planning, assessment and monitoring, instruction, and classroom organisation to accommodate student variability in multi-ability classrooms. In Queensland, the importance of differentiating the curriculum is highlighted in documents such as *Every School Succeeding: State Schools Improvement Strategy 2021–2025* (Department of Education, Queensland Government, 2020) and *Whole school approach to differentiated teaching and learning* (Department of Education, Queensland Government, 2019). Similarly, the Northern Territory encourages schools to use differentiation as part of their everyday teaching practice to identify and address the learning needs of every student through their *Curriculum, Assessment, Pedagogy and Reporting T-12: A*

Framework for Quality Education in Northern Territory Schools (Northern Territory Board of Studies, 2018).

Similarly, explicit teaching is a structured and direct approach that offers support to students through ongoing “scaffolding” and focused feedback. This involves a high level of teacher-student interaction as the teacher models the learning process using an “I do, we do, you do” strategy (Archer & Hughes, 2011). This explicit approach to teaching and learning is well-supported by AITSL, which provides an example being implemented in a primary school and suggests a useful resource package alongside the Professional Standards. Further, explicit instruction was recently validated as a teaching practice by a large sample of teachers for use in Australian early years classrooms which include students on the autism spectrum (see Taylor et al., 2021).

While co-teaching is not considered a high impact teaching strategy, it is increasingly being considered as an optional arrangement as schools shift to the whole-school approach and collaboration increases between regular and special needs teachers. This research-informed practice is based on the premise that the two teachers work together in a single physical space blending their distinct skill set while sharing resources to deliver instruction flexibly and deliberately to meet the learning needs of the entire class. Friend et al. (2010) delineate six co-teaching approaches that can be used to plan and deliver instruction (one teach, one observes; one teaches, one assists; station teaching; alternative teaching; parallel teaching; and teaming). Of these, station teaching and the one teach, one observe approaches are presented as examples in the case study that follows. This case study seeks to illustrate current efforts used to advance inclusive education for all students, including those with SEN.

Case Study: Using Co-teaching to Include Students with SEN

This case study outlines how staff at a large government primary school in south-east Queensland use co-teaching to include and educate all students in their classrooms. The school serves a growing urban community with families from over 140 different nations by providing schooling for approximately 900 students (4–12 years). Almost 5% of the student population have an identified disability and/or speech impairment, while another 10% are identified as being “at risk” in literacy and numeracy. Staffing includes a 6-member leadership team; 53 teachers (regular classroom, inclusion/special education, and specialist in physical education, music, visual arts, language other than English and English as an additional language/dialect); and a range of ancillary personnel (education assistants, guidance officer, speech pathologist).

Following a change of principals during 2015, renewed efforts to improve inclusive education at the school revolved around several key organisational changes. First, the leadership team worked with staff and the school community to generate a school vision around *Empowering Lifelong Learners* and to establish some common understandings about inclusive practices. Importantly, the vision and

understandings have been reviewed on a regular basis (e.g. at student-free days and staff meetings).

Second, the budget was renegotiated to provide an allocation for staff capacity building, particularly in the area of inclusive practices. This area is currently embedded in the school Annual Implementation Plan and has led to the conduct of an action research project, which sought to investigate teachers' perceptions of their capabilities to implement inclusive practices in their classrooms using the Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP) scale (Sharma et al., 2012). Findings reported by McGarrigle et al. (2021) show that teachers currently at this school ($n = 48$) are favourably disposed towards inclusive education and are generally confident in implementing inclusive practices in their classrooms.

Third, year level teams (regular and inclusion teachers, education assistants) were formed to support the needs of all students regardless of whether they were working above, at, or below year level expectations. This change required reviews of the student support services referral process, procedures for planning for and recording adjustments and writing support plans, and a stocktake of inclusive pedagogies being implemented across the school. Outcomes from this review were detailed in the Inclusive Schooling Practices Handbook, which is available on the school intranet to all staff and is unpacked with new staff during the school induction process.

Co-teaching has played a major role in developing inclusive practices throughout the school. During the initial planning phase, interested teams met to discuss and formulate expectations and protocols for co-teaching together. In addition, professional learning activities were incorporated into regular meetings to strengthen staff knowledge and understandings of co-teaching prior to implementation. Learnings from successive implementation phases of co-teaching within the school have led to new organisational arrangements being put in place. Before commencing co-teaching, members of each year level team share their teaching beliefs and perspectives about shared roles and responsibilities to ensure there is sufficient compatibility among co-workers. Next, each team completes a responsibilities checklist and makes collective decisions about classroom management and classroom procedures (e.g. roll marking, toilet breaks, noise levels). For every participating team, inclusion teachers are located in the same building as regular teachers to strengthen partnerships and provide additional opportunity for both planned and incidental conversations. In addition, inclusion teachers attend all year level meetings, excursions, and camps.

Currently, co-teaching occurs daily in all classrooms in the early years (preparatory to year 2) and the final year (year 6) and across 50% of timetabled classes in years 3 and 4. Non-participation of remaining teams is based on some teachers' concerns about their confidence and capability levels, together with the influence of staff turnover. Such an arrangement aligns with recommendations in the literature—participation in co-teaching should be voluntary.

As mentioned previously, Friend and colleagues (2013) have identified six approaches to co-teaching. Year level teams at this school predominantly use "station teaching" as the way to support students with SEN in key learning areas

of English (reading and writing) and mathematics. In station teaching, instructional content is divided into three or more segments, with at least one segment comprising an independent practice activity. Students are divided into groups and rotate through learning centres (stations) where content is taught or practised. The grouping system for these activities is flexibly determined using ongoing formative data (e.g. task sheets, exit slips for certain lessons). Data are analysed and plans are formulated not only at collaborative learning days and staff meetings but also during each teacher's own time.

The "one teaches, one observes" approach to co-teaching is also used, especially as a mechanism for sharing techniques. For example, this approach was used to upskill a co-teaching team in the use of a Pragmatic Organisation Dynamic Display (PODD) communication book so that they could support a student with Down syndrome to communicate with peers and adults. Initially, the speech pathologist modelled using the PODD to the inclusion teacher, who in turn demonstrated how to support the student in using his PODD while leading a whole-of-class art lesson as other team members observed. In another instance, a teacher who had attended a 1-week training course on explicit teaching with Anita Archer used multiple opportunities across the weeks that followed to demonstrate how to use the four core practices associated with this approach while other team members observed her and responding students.

Currently, the leadership team is planning further professional staff development in targeted areas around co-teaching to (a) assist in keeping the conversation and learning happening throughout the school and (b) further increase understanding and build teacher confidence so that all teachers are empowered to experiment and trial co-teaching as an effective method of instruction that is beneficial for all students. In the last few years, staff at this school have learnt that responding to student diversity requires both teachers and school leaders to move beyond established processes and practices and be willing to innovate.

Challenges and Recommendations

For more than two decades, key barriers to implementing inclusive education in Australian schools have been identified in the literature, with little evidence of these findings being addressed by governments and education systems. In recent years, advocacy groups such as the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) have commissioned Forlin et al. (2013) and Cologon (2019), respectively, to investigate current efforts towards inclusion in schooling. Other active researchers in the area (e.g. Anderson & Boyle, 2019; Dally et al., 2019; Finkelstein et al., 2021) have also provided syntheses of current issues and ways of moving inclusive education forward in this country. Four common challenges distilled from these works are consistent with concerns signalled throughout this chapter, namely, inconsistent government frameworks and policies, inadequate staff training, lack of support for

teachers, and a scarcity of research into inclusive pedagogies and practice. These interconnected challenges need to be resolved in order for schools to provide quality educational experiences and outcomes for students with SEN.

Inconsistent Government Frameworks and Policies

First and foremost, service provisions for students with SEN vary widely across the states and territories as well as across government and non-government sectors. These differences can be largely attributed to the existence of inconsistent government frameworks and policies related to inclusive education as illustrated earlier. Anderson and Boyle (2019) have put forward a reasonable solution to this fundamental issue. They suggest that “a natural starting point would be the establishment of a nationally accepted understanding of inclusive education and the development of an Australian Framework for Action” (p. 806). Taking such steps would require genuine collaboration and teamwork among federal and state authorities akin to that demonstrated in the formulation of the 2008 Melbourne Declaration and in combating the unprecedented 2019 bushfires that ravaged the country. If governments could commit to this endeavour, outcomes should include not only improved schooling for all students but more positive community attitudes towards inclusion.

Inadequate Staff Training

Second, with current ITE training viewed as a serious stumbling block to preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms, it is time for Australian universities to review and adjust their programme content. Courses must be specifically aimed at building essential knowledge and skills for including and teaching students with SEN and disabilities. Moreover, a stocktake of field placements should be undertaken, because to be workplace ready, today’s pre-service teachers need to have direct experience in inclusive settings where they are coached and supported by highly skilled teachers. This direct experience helps trainee teachers link theory with practice, interact with diverse learners, and gain confidence in teaching to students’ differences. Furthermore, school principals, as key stakeholders, need training in inclusive education so that they can better lead whole-school initiatives, support classroom teachers, and facilitate professional learning networks within and across school communities.

Lack of Support for Teachers

Third, reviews into practice have drawn attention to barriers that teachers have persistently identified as influencing their capacity to implement effective inclusive practices in their classrooms. Lack of time, both for planning and for instruction, is viewed as a prime challenge as is a lack of administrative support and having insufficient support staff. If school principals were afforded specific training in inclusive education, they would be more likely, as knowledgeable leaders, to rearrange organisational and staffing structures to reduce the impact of these factors on teachers' practice.

Scarcity of Research into Inclusive Pedagogies and Practice

Finally, funding for research is urgently needed to inform policy initiatives, support practice in schools, and bridge the policy-to-practice gap. This need is based on (a) data showing that inclusive education policies are typically restricted to rhetoric and procedures and (b) lack of local research into which teaching practices should be recommended for inclusive classrooms. University-school collaborations should be adopted as a deliberate strategy to more thoroughly investigate promising pedagogies such as co-teaching and differentiated instruction, particularly from perspectives of feasibility (i.e. access to resources) and outcomes (i.e. for students and teachers). Additionally, investigations to identify local barriers and needs in specific contexts (e.g. rural areas, remote communities) should be conducted to advance inclusive education throughout this geographically diverse country.

Concluding Statement

Inclusive education in Australia has been an unfolding reform aligned somewhat with the progressive rollout of legislations and policies. At this point in time, innovative leadership teams and motivated teachers, not governments and education systems, are building inclusive school communities across this country. Australian students with SEN need and deserve a better deal that delivers what the *Melbourne Declaration* and its 2020 update have promised: equity and excellence in schooling for all students.

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