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ARTICLE

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Teacher self-efficacy, inclusion and professional development practices: cultivating a learning environment for all

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nature of the relationship between teacher self-efficacy for inclusion in schools, and professional development practices. The research draws on qualitative data from a larger 3-year study involving 140 primary teachers in rural, regional and urban schools throughout the state of New South Wales, Australia. The article focuses upon the professional development practices of a sub-sample of teachers who identified as 'highly efficacious' ($n = 21$) in relation to inclusion and those who identified as 'lower efficacious' ($n = 20$). Drawing upon a broad thematic analytical approach, the research reveals the varied ways PD was experienced by more and less efficacious teachers. These experiences pertained to: 1) teachers' categorisation of students on the basis of perceptions of students' 'needs'; 2) teachers' approaches to classroom access and willingness to collaborate, and; 3) teachers' roles and levels of engagement with professional development for inclusion (whether as facilitators or as passive recipients). In comparison with their less efficacious colleagues, more efficacious teachers adopted a more holistic and inclusive understanding of students' needs in relation to the PD they experienced, engaged with other teachers in ways that were more mutually beneficial, and took more facilitative rather than passive roles in relation to their PD experiences.

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Teacher self-efficacy; inclusion; professional development

Introduction

In this article, we elaborate the nature of the relationship between teacher self-efficacy for inclusion in schools and the professional development[1] practices of teachers as they sought to adopt more inclusive classroom approaches. We draw upon a sub-set of teachers who identified as having higher self-efficacy in relation to inclusion, and a contrasting group who identified as having lower self-efficacy.

While much has been written about the extent to which teachers' self-efficacy influences their approaches to and valuing of inclusion, less attention has been given to the nature of professional development practices between strongly contrasting groups of teachers – particularly those with the highest and lowest levels of self-efficacy. We begin by outlining the nature of inclusive education, followed by an account of teacher self-efficacy. We then seek to reveal some of the connections between the two in relation to teachers' professional development. While some literature does focus attention upon particular approaches to PD

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and inclusion, there is little material that also focuses upon issues of self-efficacy; much related literature adopts a more fragmented approach to understanding inclusion. Consequently, we seek to shed light upon an under-researched area which connects teachers' self-efficacy, understandings of inclusion, and teacher professional development practices.

Inclusive education and teacher self-efficacy

Inclusive education

Internationally, inclusive education has gained momentum over recent decades. Inclusive education has sought to emphasise the diverse abilities, characteristics, and capacities of all learners, by connecting students, classes, and communities in meaningful ways (Booth and Ainscow 2011, De Vroey *et al.* 2016). Furthermore, inclusive education entails reduced focus upon student deficits, differences, or reified groups of students (Woodcock & Hardy, 2017; Woodcock and Jones 2020). Inclusive education focuses on enabling all students to participate in learning collectively and collaboratively, and in ways that welcome and value everybody, making everyone in the classroom accountable and enabling students to access learning together (UNESCO 1994, Woodcock & Hardy, 2017; Woodcock and Jones 2020). This is irrespective of ability, socio-economic status, cultural background, sexuality, or gender identity (Fine-Davis and Faas 2014, Moore 2016).

Nevertheless, in Australia, there is no clear dominant definition of inclusive education within policy, nationally or sub-nationally (Anderson and Boyle 2015; Hardy and Woodcock 2015, 2023). Discursively, the move towards inclusive education in policy, in Australia at least, has been positive and relatively rapid. However, material support for schools and teachers has not been actioned as quickly, often leaving school teachers and leaders to question the extent to which inclusive education is seen as possible and practicable within classrooms and schools (Webster 2018). As a result, teachers and school leaders can lack knowledge and belief in the potential of inclusive education as a vehicle for all students' learning, as well as in their own capability to successfully teach inclusively.

Teacher self-efficacy

A teacher's belief in their capability to successfully teach in inclusive classrooms is recognised as an important factor (cf. Bandura 1997). Apropos of Bandura (1986), social cognitive theory plays a significant part in helping educators to understand their own attitudes and beliefs about their capability to teach. Self-efficacy is the 'belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute the course of actions required to produce given attainments' (Bandura 1997, p. 3). A perceived sense of self-efficacy regulates behavioural choices, as well as one's level of effort and affective reactions to the environment. According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy is developed through four sources of information: (1) vicarious experiences – observations of success or failure of others of similar status or higher competence who serve as models; (2) verbal persuasion – the verbal reassurance, persuasion or encouragement of others (e.g. colleagues); (3) mastery experiences; and, (4) psychological and affective states – the amount of positive and negative affect encountered in preparation and practice.

The domain of teacher self-efficacy captures 'the teacher's belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context' (Tschannen-Moran *et al.* 1998, p. 233). The effect of teacher self-efficacy has been found to influence instruction, motivation of students, classroom management, cooperation with parents and colleagues, attitudes towards inclusive education, and engagement of students (Malinen and Savolainen 2012, Woodcock and Faith 2021). Studies have also found that teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy have applied differentiated strategies to cater for all students' needs

(Woodcock *et al.* 2022), greater practical, metacognitive, affective, and cognitive reflection in teaching practice (Moradkhani *et al.* 2017), and greater levels of resilience and determination for students to reach their potential (Woodcock and Emms 2015).

In a large-scale survey, Kiel *et al.* (2020) identified four groups of responses drawing upon a multidimensional measuring instrument utilising the self-efficacy dimensions of inclusive curriculum development, inclusive classroom management and inclusive cooperation. While teachers with higher self-efficacy engaged in more inclusive classroom practices and those with lower self-efficacy engaged in less inclusive practices, they also calibrated different subscales differently e.g. one group of teachers with higher self-efficacy in relation to curriculum development exhibited lower self-efficacy in relation to inclusive collaboration. Furthermore, teachers' appraisal of the subscales of inclusion and perceptions of implementation of the actual demands of teaching inclusively were not congruent e.g. teachers with the highest self-efficacy in inclusive collaboration had the lowest estimation of actual collaborative practices.

Teacher self-efficacy, inclusion and professional development practices

In this paper, we draw upon a broad-based conception of teacher professional development; this includes teachers' engagement with both formal (more 'traditional PD', such as workshops, and specific qualifications) and informal learning opportunities (such as learning-on-the-job and more 'life-long learning' approaches) (Muijs *et al.* 2004). Teachers' learning is not simply limited to more formal approaches but is also understood as facilitated through more informal experiences of working and engaging with colleagues as part of teachers' ongoing work; we also recognise that teachers' PD is a complex and contested space with multiple aims and outcomes (Hardy 2012).

There is relatively little research that explores the relationship between teacher self-efficacy, inclusive education and professional development practices. Some literature does make connections between particular approaches to PD and inclusion. Walton *et al.* (2019), for example, refer to how being responsive to context, supportive networks and access to relevant expertise are all important for developing situated learning experiences to cultivate inclusive practices in schools. However, there is a relative silence around issues of self-efficacy. Other literature refers to connections between pre-service teacher education/learning and teachers' self-efficacy towards inclusion; Alhumaid *et al.* (2021) refer to a six-week intervention as part of pre-service teachers' education in Saudi Arabia to try to enhance the self-efficacy of teachers towards including students with physical disabilities in general Physical Education classes, and how this led to significant improvement in these teachers' self-efficacy.

Some of the literature that does explicitly mention the relationship between PD and teacher self-efficacy for inclusion refers to specific PD initiatives and events, or reflects a more fragmented understanding of inclusion. Taliafero and Harris (2014) elaborate the effects of a one-day workshop on Physical Education teachers' self-efficacy towards inclusion of students with autism. Such categorisation (of specific learning/often special educational needs) reflects a tendency towards fragmented understandings of inclusion. Reina *et al.* (2019a) and Reina *et al.* (2019b) research evaluated in-service education programmes on Spanish Physical Education teachers' self-efficacy towards the inclusion of students with special education needs. Rachmawati *et al.* (2018) outlined the effect of differentiated instruction PD on teachers' efficacy for inclusion in Indonesian schools in Jogjakarta. Makopoulou *et al.* (2019) research revealed complex findings about the nature of short-course programmes for inclusion in the UK. While the programmes resulted in substantial increased self-efficacy amongst participants immediately following their exposure to it, this self-efficacy was not apparent over an extended period of time (3–6 months later). That impact on self-efficacy was varied amongst participants also reinforces existing research about how the effectiveness of PD depends on a range of individual and programme features (Day and Gu 2007, Opfer and Pedder 2011). Makopoulou *et al.* (2019) also revealed that school staff with between 5 and 15 years'

experience benefited most from the initiative. They also flagged important practical implications arising from the research, particularly that PD needs to be tailored to teachers' specific needs:

> The main practical implication of this study is that CPD [continuing professional development] providers should resist the temptation to design activities for a 'generic' participant. Instead, a pragmatic attitude is required, which recognises the value of CPD as something personal, tailor-made, for each individual professional. (p.12)

Such an approach also requires attention to the facilitation of learning as opposed to the transmission of content.

Some PD is much more systemic and longer-term in focus. Forlin *et al.* (2014) draw upon research undertaken in Hong Kong into a system-wide approach to PD about inclusion for teachers and its effects upon teacher attitudes, teacher efficacy and concern about inclusive education. Their research revealed that professional development had a positive but small impact on these teachers' attitudes, efficacy and concerns about educating inclusively. In the context of ongoing professional learning communities (PLCs) in Flemish primary schools, De Neve *et al*. (2015) refer to professional learning in relation to differentiated instruction and how teacher self-efficacy was enhanced by certain professional learning community (PLC) characteristics, such as reflective dialogue, and sharing high-level knowledge about differentiated instructional approaches. Interestingly, and contrary to earlier research (such as by Wahlstrom & Louis (2008)), De Neve *et al.* (2015) revealed that deprivatisation of practice was not found to be a significant practice within PLCs, possibly related to these Flemish beginning teachers only visiting their colleagues' classrooms infrequently to provide feedback to one another.

Methods and methodology

Participants

The study draws upon the insights of primary school teachers' professional development experiences towards inclusion. The research study is part of a larger project which interviewed 140 primary (elementary) schoolteachers across rural, regional, and urban schools in New South Wales (NSW). Schools were randomly selected within each region in NSW, and are representative of a range of characteristics including size of the school (ranging from 35–750 students), socio-economic status, ethnicity and Indigeneity. This article draws upon those teachers with the highest levels of teacher self-efficacy ($n = 21$) and those with the lowest levels of teacher self-efficacy ($n = 20$) – a total of 41 primary school teachers.

The data comprise 7 male teachers and 34 female teachers; 83% of teachers were female, which is broadly reflective of the proportion of female to male teachers (85%) in New South Wales (Australian Bureau of Statistics ABS 2022). The teachers ranged from less than 1 year to 50 years' experience, with an average of 14 years. The median number of years' experience overall was 16 years; for lower efficacious teachers, the median was 7 years' experience, and for higher efficacious teachers, the median was 20 years' experience.

Method

Data were drawn from individual interviews with each teacher at a time of the principal and teachers' choosing. A replacement teacher covered each teacher's class to enable their participation. All data were anonymised. The interviews were approximately one hour in length and included varied questions pertaining to inclusive education. Although there was a variety of questions asked in each interview about inclusion and professional development practices, this paper focuses on the specific professional development teachers experienced in relation to inclusion. As well as the interview questions, each participant also responded to several questionnaires, including a demographic questionnaire, and Tschannen-Moran and

Woolfolk Hoy's (2001) teacher self-efficacy scale (TSES). The TSES consists of 12 statements regarding teachers' beliefs about their capability to: effectively instruct students in their classroom (including statements such as 'to what extent can you provide an alternative explanation or example when students are confused?'); engage all students within one's classroom (including statements such as 'how much can you do to motivate students who show low interest in school work?'), and; manage classroom behaviour (including statements such as 'how much can you do to control disruptive behavior in the classroom?'). The TSES included a Likert-scale response from 1 (none at all) to 9 (a great deal). The higher each respondent scored, the higher their level of teacher self-efficacy. The statements were loaded onto one factor (teacher self-efficacy) with a (Cronbach's alpha) reliability of .883. The level of teacher self-efficacy scores from all 140 participants ranged from 9 (out of 9) down to 4.99. The selection of participants with the highest and lowest scores were 21 and 20 respectively, ensuring that there was a natural break in the teacher self-efficacy scores between those selected and those not selected in the study.

Procedure

All relevant institutional and education departmental ethical approvals were gained. Once approved, schools were randomly selected, and principals were approached and invited to participate in the study. The interviews were carried out at each school, by a member of the research team, at a convenient time for participants. A casual teacher was employed at each school to replace the participating teachers so that they could be released from their teaching duties. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber.

Analysis

Drawing upon Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2019) analyses of qualitative data, the authors adopted a thematic analysis approach to data coding across multiple cycles, making connections and identifying themes within the data. This analysis included in relation to the earlier theorising and literature pertaining to inclusion, teacher self-efficacy and professional development. This enabled the authors to adopt a recursive analytical approach between the data and various indicators of teacher self-efficacy as these pertained to inclusive education, and particularly in relation to teachers' professional development (cf. Saldana 2016). This led to the identification of key themes within two broad categories of teachers: those who identified as having higher self-efficacy, and those who identified as having lower self-efficacy.

Findings: teacher self efficacy, inclusion and PD

Within the data, and across these two groups of teachers – highly efficacious and lower efficacious teachers – three broad themes were identified. These related to how the PD they experienced influenced: 1) the extent to which teachers categorised students on the basis of perceptions of student 'needs'; 2) teachers' approaches to classroom access and willingness to collaborate, and; 3) teachers' levels of engagement with professional development (particularly whether they construed themselves more as facilitators or simply as passive recipients of PD).

Highly efficacious teachers

Non-categorical inclusion for all

In contrast with Taliafero, Harris and Pilkington's (Taliafero and Harris 2014) research, amongst highly efficacious teachers in our study, there was a tendency to avoid deficit categories when

referring to students; these teachers tended to be more inclusive of all students. This was exemplified through one teacher's individual learning through the Kids Matter initiative:

> A lot of my own professional development has led me there anyway. I did mention Kids Matter and I was very lucky to do two of the components of Kids Matter. . . . I'm certainly in there fighting for it to be picked up a little bit more this year and I can certainly use inclusion as a way of defending that argument. (SW08b, Female, 20+ years)

For another teacher, in response to a cooperative learning PD initiative she was involved in, everyone had a role to play, and was responsible to one another:

> Everyone has a role, everyone's accountable within the group. A lot of talk. So, the kids . . . my classrooms went from very quiet [to more talkative] . . . which is good, because that's the philosophy now; it's all about that discussion. (CB08, Female, 22 years)

Inclusive PD was seen as incorporating different areas/domains such as behaviour and various ways of enhancing academic engagement for all students:

> We have had other professional development . . . in terms of behaviour and academic inclusion. (MP04, Female, 7 years)

For a teacher emphasising differentiation for all students, a focus upon every child was key:

> Most professional learning that we do here would cover how to ensure children – well the classroom is inclusive – because we look at things like differentiating to ensure that we are reaching every child. (P01, Female, 20 years)

For another teacher, while the 'same instruction' for all children was referred to, this should nevertheless be undertaken in a differentiated manner:

> You know kids are different and some kids need it done differently so we've got those skills to give those children those different structures . . . to fill their needs (P03, Male, 10 years)

This included in relation to writing:

> So, we did a focus on differentiation in writing last year (P07, Female, 30 years)

In these ways, these teachers actually exhibited more explicitly inclusive dispositions, with considerable attention to differentiation, as they sought to avoid simplistic categorisations or deficit conceptions of their students' needs.

Accessing other teachers' classrooms as a mutually beneficial learning experience

Amongst more highly efficacious teachers, there was also a tendency to foster and actively participate in school-based PD, and to collaborate more actively with colleagues within their own school, and in other schools as a vehicle for their own learning; this was a more active approach to practice-based learning (Kemmis *et al.* 2014). This collaboration also included providing opportunities to actively access other teachers' classrooms, on a regular basis, to witness other teachers' practices:

> And another big part of learning and in terms of inclusion would be we have regular access to go and view other teachers' practices . . . whether it be inside our school or whether it be an external school as part of our community of schools. (P20, Female, 15 years)

> For me the best type of professional learning is going and viewing it in practice. (P20, Female, 15 years)

> It's definitely getting into other people's classrooms. (P10, Female, 6 years)
> I prefer observation. I prefer to be in a classroom. (MP04, Female, 7 years)

For another teacher, as a 'visual learner', seeing a demonstration was particularly useful:

> I'm a visual learner, okay, so I like learning if someone demonstrates . . . seeing things in action. (MDPS07, Female, 13 years)

In contrast to De Neve *et al.* (2015), learning from each other was seen as key, and could be utilised to ensure involvement in individual workshops was productive:

> The best, I think, is when we go to a little workshop. And then we go away and we implement it in our class. And then we go and we watch each other implementing whatever it is that we're learning about. And then we come back and we reflect. (P17, Female, 38 years)

> Lots of support for classrooms, so we go into their classrooms; they come into ours and watch us. (TGPS09, Female, 30 years)

This accessing of classroom practice, including with other teachers, could also occur in other schools, and was seen as benefiting these teachers' learning:

> Around inclusion. . . I would visit other schools to see how they were going, doing things . . . so we got to sit down, have professional walks with each other most of the time . . . I would say I'd like to go and see how they run their literacy . . . It's always practical with me. . . . I think you find out more ideas from other teachers and doing it that way than just sitting at a computer. (LH05, Female, 27 years)

> Most effective for myself . . . would be just visiting someone who's actually doing it, like a school that's doing something. Like, we, sort of, go down to . . . a local school and just seeing their classroom and seeing what they're doing (P04, Female, 22 years)

> So, schools from the local community getting together is, I find, a lot more beneficial. (MP06, Female, 25 years)

> I prefer to be there and meet and speak to others. And have that peer review. Or even just listening to other people and . . . hear their successes or their failures. (MP04, Female, 7 years)

> So, I think probably for PD the better ones are where you go to other schools, and you see what other schools are doing and how they run. (MP06, Female, 25 years)

Being *in situ*, and hearing first-hand from these teachers was valued. This more situated, classroom-focused and engaged learning (Opfer and Pedder 2011) occurred in teachers' own schools, as well as through the opportunity to visit other schools.

Delivering/Facilitating professional development

Amongst the more efficacious teachers, many were also heavily involved in delivering professional development, even as some of this delivery pertained to domains beyond inclusion, or did not always foreground inclusion *per se*. Such approaches reflected a more 'life-long' learning disposition (Muijs *et al.* 2004). Sometimes this PD related to particular policies or was very broad in orientation:

> Being the learning support teacher, I've had a lot of training on *Every Student, Every School*. So, I did quite a lot of training and I then came back and trained our staff. (P17, Female, 38 years)

> When I did my professional development, I based it all on that, which is what I expect and get the best from mine. It is a bit of workshop, it is a bit of information. It's examples in the classroom. It's opportunities to try some of those things out. (SW08b, Female, 20+ years)

> So, yes, and I suppose now as a leader, we're in charge . . . we do a lot. We're the ones who are running it with our staff (CB08, Female, 22 years)

Efforts to facilitate PD also pertained to differentiation:

> I've done lots of professional learning, and delivered professional learning on differentiation, and ways, strategies and things to allow students to be involved. (P10, Female, 10 years)

> We did a focus on differentiation in writing last year (P07, Female, 30 years)

At the same time, there was also evidence of facilitating PD for other teachers that was more personalised to their immediate needs (cf. Makopoulou *et al.* 2019), including at their particular year/stage level:

> I do professional learning in my stage meetings. And that's flexible .... We may have small groups of teachers that we identify there is a need for just targeted professional learning. And then we'll take those teachers aside and we'll offer that professional learning for them. (MDPS06, Female, 18 years)

Such delivery included in relation to Indigenous education:

> I've done quite a bit with Aboriginal education ... so leading Aboriginal education. I've done some cultural things and then I've passed that on to the school. So, where we were maybe three years ago, to where we are now, has been a huge growth, but we obviously still need to do more. (MP06, Female, 25 years)

In this way, the foci of these efforts to foster professional development were diverse.

Low efficacious teachers

Categorically-oriented, topic-specific PD

Reflecting Taliafero, Harris and Pilkington's (2014) more categorically-oriented conception of students' needs, some teachers referred to a wide array of categories of students in their understandings of inclusion. These specific categories were flagged as attracting attention and requiring more focused PD. This categorisation was evident in a variety of domains as diverse as students with dyslexia, trauma, autism and those seen as gifted and talented:

> I've done a lot of work on kids with reading difficulties. I've done Reading Recovery training. I've done dyslexia support and I've done work on autistic or on the spectrum kids with those sorts of disabilities. (P18, Male, 38 years)

> I've done a dyslexia course (ST02, Female, 5 years)

> Next week I'm going to a trauma course so that will be good and in a few weeks' time I'm going to an autistic course. (P16, Female, 9 years)

> We did our autistic and other spectrum one. (TGPS07, Female, 17 years)

> We did have certain courses like the autism intervention and even when we've done various ones on maths and English, they all catered for how to differentiate for different classes as well. (TGPS02, Male, 4.5 years)

> We did Special Ed., [including] gifted and talented (TGPS07, Female, 17 years)

While such teachers reflect how there is a strong focus upon particular areas, such as autism, amongst a variety of other areas, there was also considerable attention to behaviour/classroom management amongst other categories:

> I've done a few courses on ... behaviour management. (KT03, Female, 7 years)

> I was PBL[2] trained so that's where my PBL background comes from. (P06, Female, 17 years)

> We felt the need to participate in a number of training and development days which cater for autistic children ... .also dyslexia, and I think behaviour management ... And I believe it's helped me with some ideas to use in the classroom with those children ... .I have done hearing impaired as well. (OMO3, Female, 6 years)

Special education was another key focus of attention for some teachers, and often associated with university studies:

> The only thing that I have was I did at university, Special Ed. I chose a few electives. (LT04, Female, < 1 year)

> I did actually study Special Ed (TGPS07, Female, 17 years)

There was also attention to other discrete PD, including in relation to Indigenous education, but as part of a myriad of other foci:

> I've done a lot of Aboriginal education professional learning, and there've been bits and pieces of students with little EAL/D[3] learning. (TGPS01, Male, 16 years)

For some teachers, a strong focus on particular literacies dominated over a more holistic inclusive approach:

> I've had L3[4] training . . . I did AL – Accelerated Literacy – which was . . . based around a literacy program that was supposed to help Indigenous students (TW09, Female, 2 years)

> I think it's more just how you're going to deliver your literacy lessons as opposed to inclusion because inclusion in an ideal world would just fit in my current class this year. (LK04, Female, 50 years)

Teachers could also be contradictory in their understandings of inclusion. For the teacher above (LK04), focusing on a specific literacy approach seemed to contrast with a broader understanding that inclusion entailed working with children and how they work best:

> That's inclusivity, how you deliver the lesson is more you know the L3 . . .. So, it's more how to teach the content whereas inclusivity is how you work with the kids and how that kid works best. (LK04, Female, 50 years)

In these ways, less efficacious teachers tended to have more discrete, topic focused conceptions of inclusion, and seemed to struggle to see how their PD experiences could help foster a more substantive conception of inclusion.

Accessing other teachers' classrooms: the need for 'hands-on' experiences

In contrast with the higher efficacious teachers, lower efficacious teachers tended to emphasise the need for more 'hands on' experiences and accessing other teachers/practitioners' classrooms for their own specific needs, rather than also drawing upon these experiences to facilitate other's learning. There was a sense of the need to observe teachers and how they taught inclusively in teachers' own school, and other schools:

> Obviously practical . . . observing other staff. . . . being able to see how another teacher caters for that range of abilities to make sure, 'Hang on a minute, no, I am doing a good job,' or. 'No, wow, I'm not doing enough' . . . Just to get that understanding. (AW07, Female, 6 years)

> I think observation is definitely the best way to learn something like that. . . . So, having that experience was the best kind of training. (TGPS02, Male, 4.5 years)

> I've had an opportunity to go to a number of schools, . . . and observe other teachers and what they're doing . . . that's been really useful. (P06, Female, 17 years)

'Hands-on' experience *in situ* was valued by these less efficacious teachers. Active involvement was valued more highly than passive listening:

> At university, you definitely learn a lot about inclusivity and . . . how it looks in a classroom, how it looks in a school. I think it doesn't really set in until you see it in practice. (MP05, Male, <1 year)

> I think that professional learning needs to be a lot more hands-on. (CTPS02, Female, 2 years)

> So yes, it's definitely, hands-on things are more useful . . .[than] just being told (TW09, Female, 2 years)

> Hands-on. I prefer to be, you know, up and doing something. (OMO3, Female, 6 years)

> The ones that are hands-on are the ones you learn from the most. (P06, Female, 17 years)

The capacity to see what was occurring in other schools – a more practice-oriented approach (Kemmis *et al.* 2014) – was particularly valued by some teachers if it could be undertaken with other teachers from the school:

> The best are when teachers go outside the school usually as a group and where you do get to hear and talk to people (LK04, Female, 50 years)

There was also a valuing of visits from external staff, including from the broader Education Department/system, who may visit teachers' classrooms:

> For me, I think having someone come out and talk to us, and be able to talk and answer our questions face-to-face – having that support there. And also, I guess, having someone come into the classroom and help out and see our environment and help us to figure out how best to support the students. (SW07, Female, 4 years)

> I think, ideally something where you have a session with someone coming in from the Department, and then you have time to observe, and then you have time to go back and confer or discuss things. (TGPS02, Male, 4.5 years)

Alternatives to hands-on approaches, such as online courses, were seen as superficial 'ticking boxes'/'looking good on paper'. They could also be modes in which teachers could 'skip through' without engaging substantively with the actual content:

> We do do a lot of courses online. . . . It might be convenient, it might get to the masses but . . . it doesn't sink in. . . . It ticks boxes, it looks good on paper . . . . But in terms of practice and outcome in the classroom, I think it's a bit patronising. (P18, Male, 38 years)

> Recently, I did an autism course, which was an online course, predominantly. And, with some of those online modules that you do through the Department, you can very easily . . . just skip through the whole thing without actually doing anything. (TGPS01, Male, 16 years)

In these ways, more 'hands on' experiences and accessing other teachers/practitioners' classrooms were valued, but there was little or no attention to how these practices could inform/help facilitate other teachers' learning at these teachers' schools. Teachers' responses also reflect how the learning that was occurring was very piecemeal in approach and the necessity of taking personal, workplace and other external factors into consideration in developing PD initiatives (Day and Gu 2007).

More passive/superficial responses to PD for inclusion

Less efficacious teachers tended to display more superficial understandings of PD for inclusion and not participate in actual PD provision. This more passive approach to PD provision is perhaps understandable, given teachers' vagueness about whether and how they engaged with inclusion:

> We would have staff development meetings and stuff on a Wednesday afternoon, and I guess that you could say inclusive practices were embedded into some of those meetings. (MP05, Male, < 1 year)

When teachers did recall elements of their professional development, this could be in relatively derogatory terms, and seemed to value more traditional approaches to such learning over teachers' ongoing learning in practice (cf. Muijs *et al.* 2004, Hardy 2012):

> Around inclusion? . . . It wasn't even professional development . . . Like this guy . . . he was born with like small hands and legs and things like that. And he came in and did games and that with the kids, and tells his story about him being excluded as a child in sports . . . and how. . .we can do stuff together . . . . So that was good and the kids got a lot out of it, but me, personally, not much. (MT01, Male, 7 years)

For another teacher, various 'updates' also flagged a more reductive sense of inclusion, and of PD provision in that regard. PD for inclusion was not easily recalled, was described in vague terms, and entailed being 'updated' about specific issues/foci:

> The other inclusion . . . is when we do have to do our updates when we do PDs and stuff. And we learn about welfare and . . . what's the other one? The disability one . . . I guess the legal rights of students and parents, to ensure that everybody gets a fair education? (TD06, Female, 10 years)

This vagueness was also evident in the very general terms applied to teachers' experiences of inclusion:

> And, I mean you learn as you go, you just, you know, do what works and what doesn't. (TD06, Female, 10 years)

> I think we did a unit on Indigenous students, but I don't remember a whole lot of what we covered. (TGPS08, Female, 5.5 years)

Consequently, these teachers were not only not actively involved in PD provision but were themselves often unable to recall in any detail the actual (formal and informal) PD they experienced. Several struggled to identify PD in its myriad forms.

Discussion: cultivating a learning environment for all

The findings reveal that more efficacious teachers were focused upon the processes of professional development, rather than the specific content, which tended to dominate the perspectives of less efficacious teachers. Less efficacious teachers were more likely to identify specific categories/topics of PD which they had experienced and which they believed beneficial for their own personal learning. At the same time, more efficacious teachers engaged in more mutual learning arrangements, and tended to focus more strongly upon what they learnt from the PD they experienced. Finally, more efficacious teachers took a much more active role in PD provision, while less efficacious teachers frequently struggled to recall the specific details of the PD they experienced.

Highly efficacious teachers tended to discuss *all* students and were not so 'categorical' in their descriptions. However, while they mentioned the process of PD, for low efficacious teachers, and reflecting Taliafero, Harris and Pilkington's (2014) research, there was a tendency to emphasise particular categories of difference and adopt a more 'topical' approach to PD (e.g. classroom management, or dyslexia). More efficacious teachers focused upon the needs of *all* students and sought to differentiate for every child (Taliafero and Harris 2014), while less efficacious teachers focused upon specific categories of students, indicating a less inclusive approach. Less efficacious teachers were aware of a range of PD in a variety of special education and other domains – reading difficulties, dyslexia, autism, trauma, gifted and talented, Indigenous – but they also tended to focus upon specific/discrete areas – particularly autism and behaviour. More efficacious teachers were able to refer to issues of differentiation more substantively – including in seeking to be inclusive of the needs of all children, and as an important domain in the facilitation of other teachers' learning.

More highly efficacious teachers seemed to engage in and benefit from more informal PD (cf. Rachmawati *et al.* 2018) while lower efficacious teachers tended to be 'tied' to more specific programmes/workshops and attached their sense of understanding to such one-off events. While collaboration and informal learning were also evident amongst lower-efficacious teachers, these teachers tended to focus upon more formalised PD, and struggled to elaborate upon, or recognise, opportunities for informal learning.

More efficacious teachers expressed how they benefited from accessing other teachers' classrooms and how such access seemed to be a mutually engaged and productive experience. For less efficacious teachers, accessing other teachers' classrooms was considered beneficial but these more 'hands-on' experiences seemed to be oriented predominantly towards their own needs, rather than how such collaboration could be construed as beneficial for both the observer and the observed (and others beyond this immediate interaction). Less efficacious teachers tended to treat these relationships more as a one-way process, rather than reflecting upon the shared benefits of such relationships. Reference to external personnel (e.g. Departmental staff) visiting

these teachers was also part of this scenario and seemed to reflect a more 'detached', one-way process of learning. There was also a more 'passive' sense of engagement with teachers working in classrooms in their own schools and a sense in which learning was something to be 'acquired' rather than the cultivation of a changed disposition towards their everyday work (Muijs *et al.* 2004). For more highly efficacious teachers, there was more of a mutual regard for those with whom they were making contact.

Lower efficacious teachers emphasised 'hands on' experiences; this was similarly valued by more efficacious teachers. However, again, the two groups differed in the way these experiences were understood for how they enabled their learning. For the less efficacious teachers, the notion of discussing their practice with colleagues was less evident. Rather, 'having someone come out and talk to us' (SW07) and 'a session with someone coming in from the Department' (TGPS02) reflected the tendency to be 'tied' to more specific programmes/workshops/initiatives. While both groups of teachers experienced both more formal ('traditional PD') and informal learning opportunities (learning-on-the-job) and from classroom practice (Muijs *et al.* 2004, Hardy 2012), more efficacious teachers seemed to be able to maximise both kinds of learning opportunities, including learning how to draw upon more formalised learning experiences to inform the more informal learning they engaged in with teachers in their own schools and which they facilitated. While PD involving teachers working with colleagues (and researchers) can be beneficial for developing teachers' capacities to develop more differentiated instructional approaches (Valiandes and Neophytou 2018), our research reveals this as a variegated experience, reflecting and resulting in different levels of agency in relation to teachers' learning and self-efficacy.

In relation to teachers' agency, there was also a qualitatively different approach between the two groups of teachers towards the PD they experienced. The more active approach of the more highly efficacious teachers seemed to better reflect how these teachers took more seriously calls for 'CPD as something personal, tailor-made, for each individual professional', rather than something that can be designed for a 'generic participant' (Makopoulou *et al.* 2019, p. 12). For more highly efficacious teachers, there was considerably more attention to being active participants in PD, including running PD for their colleagues. In contrast, less efficacious teachers had more superficial understandings of PD, with consequently more passive engagement with their own learning. That some teachers did not recognise how experiences of inclusion for their students could also be learning experience for themselves was indicative of such disconnect ('Like this guy . . . he was born with like small hands and legs . . . and tells his story about him being excluded as a child. . .. the kids got a lot out of it, but me personally not much' (MT01)). Even as some of the PD the more efficacious teachers delivered and supported was broad in orientation (such as in relation to specific policies (e.g. *Every Student, Every School*), there was also consideration for what they valued about the PD they experienced, and consideration about how to enact more beneficial PD for their colleagues; this included recognition of reflective dialogue and knowledge of differentiated instruction as powerful vehicles for enhancing teachers' self-efficacy (De Neve *et al.* 2015). These teachers adopted a leadership mantle, and sought to facilitate not only 'whole staff' learning but also learning as relevant to individuals and specific groups of teachers in their school ('We may have small groups of teachers that we identify there is a need for just targeted professional learning . . . and we'll offer that professional learning for them.' (MDPS06)).

Finally, in relation to teachers' experiences and gender more broadly, there were also suggestive patterns arising from the research, even as these were not the initial focus of attention. In relation to experience, the mean score for higher efficacious teachers was 20.7 years' experience, whereas for teachers expressing lower self-efficacy, the mean score was 10.7 years' experience. Those teachers with higher efficacy essentially had about twice as much experience as teachers with lower efficacy. Also, in broad terms, teachers with approximately 13 to 30 years of experience seemed to be broadly efficacious. In terms of gender, overall, there was also a tendency for more males to be less efficacious than females; while there were 2 males (10% of teachers) in the higher efficacy group, there were 5 males (25% of teachers) in the lower efficacy group.

Conclusion

This paper has revealed more and less efficacious teachers' experiences of PD as variable but also how what appear to be similar experiences may result in varied levels of understandings of self-efficacy and engagement in their own (and their students') learning more broadly. While highly efficacious teachers were less likely to reflect more deficit conceptions of students in how they described the PD they experienced, less efficacious teachers tended to overemphasise specific categories of student capability/disposition in their PD accounts. While accessing teachers' classrooms was valued by both groups of teachers, more efficacious teachers tended to be more likely to pay attention to the mutually beneficial experiences of such engagement while less efficacious teachers adopted a more transactionary approach to such involvement – for what they could 'get out' of the experience. Finally, the research reveals that more efficacious teachers were able to draw upon their own, broader conceptions and understandings of inclusion to help provide more productive learning environments – not only for themselves but for their colleagues. This was a key point of difference from their less efficacious colleagues who had more superficial understandings of the PD they experienced, and an inability to see whether or how such PD could enhance their understanding of inclusion.

The research reveals a need for much more active attention to teachers' professional development practices and how different teachers make sense of such experiences. Such an approach requires consideration of where teachers are at in terms of their own learning journey (cf. Day and Gu 2007, Makopoulou *et al*. 2019) and the extent to which they understand and value a more holistic conception of inclusion. Support for more active approaches to teachers' learning also require recognition of the capacities of more efficacious teachers. There needs to be greater consideration of how schools and school systems might draw upon these teachers' experiences in developing a more holistic and robust conception of inclusion, to help foster enhanced understandings of inclusion amongst their less efficacious colleagues. The result will be the cultivation of a learning environment that genuinely respects the needs of *all* students.

Notes

1. Teachers in this study referred to the terms 'professional development' and 'professional learning' interchangeably.
2. PBL – Positive Behaviour for Learning, a popular behaviour management program in Australian schools.
3. English as an Additional Language or Dialect.
4. Language, Learning and Literacy – a common pedagogical approach to teaching reading and writing.

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We have no known conflict of interest to disclose

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