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Pre-service Teachers' Perspectives on their Preparation for Inclusive Teaching: Implications for Organizational Change in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This single case study examined the perspectives of 12 pre-service teachers in one Ontario teacher education program towards their preparation for inclusive teaching using Sensemaking theory as a theoretical framework. Semi-structured interviews as well as document analysis for inclusive education policies were conducted. The findings showed that pre-service teachers perceive inclusion as a collaborative policy practice that requires the possession of a positive mindset, respect towards all learners, and the necessary resources. Moreover, the findings suggest the need for the examined program to critically review its curricular structure in terms of how course designs and requirements would further support future teachers' knowledge and practices around inclusive teaching. In addition, completing the field-based experience component under the supervision of inclusion-oriented associate teachers and in K-12 classrooms that exemplify students' diversity was found crucial.

Cette étude d'un cas unique a examiné les perspectives de 12 enseignants et enseignantes en formation inscrits dans un programme d'éducation en Ontario concernant leur préparation à l'enseignement inclusif dans lequel la théorie du Sensemaking (la prise de conscience) a été employée en tant que cadre théorique. Des entrevues semi-structurées ainsi que l'analyse de documents relatifs aux politiques d'enseignement inclusif ont été menées. Les résultats ont montré que les enseignants et les enseignantes en formation perçoivent l'inclusion comme une pratique de politique collaborative qui exige d'avoir un état d'esprit positif, du respect envers tous les apprenants et l'accès aux ressources adéquates. De plus, les résultats suggèrent qu'il est nécessaire de revoir de façon critique la structure de cours du programme examiné pour que la conception et les exigences du cours puissent améliorer davantage les connaissances et les pratiques des futurs enseignants et enseignantes en ce qui concerne l'enseignement inclusif. Par ailleurs, il a été constaté que le fait de compléter l'expérience sur le terrain sous la supervision d'enseignants et d'enseignantes formés à l'enseignement inclusif dans des salles de classe de la maternelle à la douzième année où la diversité des élèves est exemplifiée serait primordial.

Keywords

teacher education, inclusive education, sensemaking, case study, pre-service teachers, practice; formation des enseignants et des enseignantes, enseignement inclusif, Sensemaking - prise de conscience, étude de cas, enseignants et enseignantes en formation, pratique

With the continuous worldwide recognition of students' diversity in today's classrooms, teacher education programs have become one of the prominent venues that assist in combating marginalization and exclusionary practices in schools, enabling a promising learning experience for all learners (Ontario Ministry of Education/OME, 2017). However, lack of training for inclusive teaching (Florian et al., 2010; Forlin et al., 2009) has led recently graduated teachers to face instructional challenges in supporting diverse learners, contributing to the reproduction of unjust practices in schools (López-Torrijo & Mengual-Andrés, 2015; Subban & Mahlo, 2016). Such challenges can ultimately prevent the inclusion of students who have been historically marginalized on the basis of their ability, language, creed, culture, ethnicity, socio-economic background, or immigration status (Mitchell, 2017). Bransford et al., (2005) argue that

to meet the expectations they now face, teachers need a new kind of preparation—one that enables them to go beyond 'covering the curriculum' to actually enable learning for students who learn in very different ways. Programs that prepare teachers need to consider the demands of today's schools in concert with the growing knowledge base about learning and teaching if they are to support teachers in meeting these expectations. (p. 2)

A study by Walker (2016) in the US concluded that the education movement towards inclusion indicates the necessity to understand how teachers are being prepared for inclusive practices, "before they enter the workforce, as well as the types of professional development they receive throughout their career" (p. 2). In Canada, a study by Specht et al. (2016) across the Faculties of Education in different provinces revealed that, "given the importance of attitudes, knowledge, skills and confidence for the success of practicing teachers" (p. 2), it is imperative to understand how teacher education programs prepare pre-service teachers (PTs) for inclusive teaching.

Due to the growing needs of the inclusive classroom, Forlin (2010a) noted that a reconsideration of teacher training practices and programs is a significant priority in teacher education research to warrant that future teachers are ready to practice inclusive teaching. To achieve an in-depth understanding of their preparation for inclusion, this study examined the perspectives of 12 PTs from one Ontario teacher education program through the lens of Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995). This theory attends to the narratives of individuals about a particular phenomenon to further understand their experiences, challenges, and opportunities within their situated socio-cultural contexts.

Research Context

Inclusive education is the educational approach through which *all* children learn together in the same classroom regardless of their race, gender, religion, individual learning needs, socio-economic level, and cultural backgrounds (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization/UNESCO, 1994). Relatedly, the Salamanca statement titled *Education For All* (EFA) has called upon the educational institutions to consider inclusive education as a matter of law and human rights issue for all individuals (UNESCO, 1994). The Salamanca statement aimed to enhance all learners' access to a quality and equitable education regardless of their diverse needs and backgrounds.

Inclusive Education in Ontario

In Ontario Canada, inclusive education is built upon a fundamental principle that “every student has the opportunity to succeed, regardless of ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability” (OME, 2014a, p. 8) among other factors. Relatedly, the OME (2014b) considers the existing diversity in Ontario as one of the province’s greatest assets, and thus aims to promote inclusivity in society in ways that help in developing a more inclusive and accessible education system. On the ground, the adoption of inclusive education in Ontario has been represented in the release of many policy initiatives including, but are not limited to, Policy/Program Memoranda PPM NO.119 (1993, 2009, 2013); PPM NO.108; PPM NO.112 (OME, 2014), and recently the *Ontario’s Education Equity Action Plan* (OEEAP) in 2017.

The OEEAP constituted a revised version of *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (OME, 2014b). Therefore, it was intended to continue ensuring that all students in Ontario schools are welcomed and encouraged to thrive in an advanced learning environment where care, inclusion, support, mutual respect, and students’ well-being are highly valued (OME, 2017).

Teacher Education in Ontario

In line with other jurisdictions in Canada, all previous Ontario governments have put a significant focus on education as a policy priority with “the most recent years witnessing a steadily growing interest in teaching and teacher education policy” (Ontario College of Teachers/OCT, 2006, p. 9). According to the OCT, future teachers need to be diversity-oriented, respectful and responsive to their students’ various needs, and to obtain the skill sets needed to perform differentiated instruction and assessments practices that support all learners (OCT, 2006).

To enhance future teachers’ practices and following a research about the career path of certified teachers who graduated in the last ten years, the OCT required all Ontario’s Faculties of Education to extend their teacher education program from 2 to 4 terms (OCT, 2013). Commencing September 2015, a new Ontario teacher education program called the *Enhanced Teacher Education Program (ETEP)* went into effect in all Ontario’s Faculties of Education (OCT, 2013).

To understand how pre-service teachers in one Ontario teacher education program make sense of their preparation for inclusive teaching, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do pre-service teachers, informed by their teacher preparation program, make sense of the principles of inclusive education and its related practices in schools?
2. How do pre-service teachers reflect on their program’s organizational design in preparing them for inclusive teaching practices?

Literature Review

By conducting an extensive review about inclusion and teacher education, I found that many studies have focused on PTs’ skill development for inclusion (Forlin, 2010a; McCray & McHatton, 2011; Rose & Garner, 2010) and their attitudes and beliefs (Loreman, 2010; Shade & Stewart, 2001; Sharma et al., 2008; Sharma & Sokal, 2015; Specht et al., 2016) towards inclusive

education. In addition, the call to further engage in research that examines teacher preparation programs and inclusive education was evident in the literature (Ainscow, 2007; Rosenberg & Walther-Thomas, 2014; Specht et al., 2016; Spooner et al., 2010).

According to many international studies, advancing the inclusive education approach and teacher preparation for inclusion appears to rest upon the creation of more inclusive curricula (Benner & Judge, 2000; Rouse, 2010), and a robust collaboration (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Harvey et al., 2010; Keefe et al., 2000) among those involved in teacher education. Collaboration and inclusive curricula are seen as significant factors that would advance inclusive teaching preparation. However, the lack of funding as well as the prevailing designs of teacher education programs (Miles & Ahuja, 2007; OCUFA, 2013; Slee, 2010) have become institutional constraints that render the practice of inclusion, particularly among novice teachers, a challenging task to perform.

Overview of Global Challenges with Inclusive Teaching

In Ireland, Kelly et al. (2014) found that Irish legislation and educational policies do facilitate inclusion by offering guidelines; however, the ways in which such policies are being incorporated into practices remain subject to the multiple interpretations of actors in schools. They found that exclusionary practices remain, as some students continue to move from the mainstream schools to special schools due to an inadequate school environment and resources. Kelly et al. (2014) believe that implementing inclusive teaching has to overcome many obstacles including lack of teacher training for inclusion, the absence of tailored and relevant educational assessments, as well as incompatible classroom curricula.

In Hong Kong, Forlin (2010a) reported complex factors that obstruct a significant adoption of inclusion in schools including lack of teachers' autonomy and inclusion experience, fixed curricula, as well as high working demands and expectations. To overcome these challenges, Forlin (2010a) argues that external control on students' achievement such as the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) assessments in the Ontarian context, should be minimized to allow classroom teachers to focus on and develop their inclusive skills, as well as to monitor their students' academic progress.

In a Canadian study that examined the perspectives of PTs towards inclusive practice, Specht (2016) found that successful inclusion occurs when teachers are "comfortable with the use of appropriate pedagogy and when they believe that all students can learn and should be included in heterogeneous classrooms" (p. 894). However, Specht (2016) claims that developing PTs' capacity as well as their competency for inclusive practices is indeed challenging. Hence, the need to examine PTs' perspectives towards their inclusive teaching preparation under the enhanced teacher education program, the ETEP.

For Darling-Hammond (2006), teacher education research needs to focus on how to promote coherence between the overall aims of teacher education programs, their curriculum structure, and their field-based experiences. Achieving such a goal will help PTs in those programs to develop a robust conceptualization of the teaching practice and in making "sense of disparate, unconnected experiences" (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 306). Given the inclusivity challenges that exist in schools and the overwhelming workloads that in-service teachers continue to report, understanding how teacher education programs develop inclusion-oriented teachers is undoubtedly significant (Bransford et al., 2005). According to Rioux (2007), the progress around inclusive education in Canada is evident through the promotion of an equitable education for all

learners, however, she argues that such a growth invites contemporary teacher education programs to have new teaching standards that embrace diversity and inclusion principles.

Teaching and Learning Approaches in Teacher Education Programs

With the development of more inclusive education policies worldwide, Forlin (2010a) argues that teacher education needs to provide future teachers with evidenced-inclusive skills and pedagogies. Such skills and pedagogies are fundamental to enhance teachers' competency in supporting the needs of all learners in the inclusive classroom (McCrimmon, 2015). Addressing the implication of inclusive pedagogies on students' overall learning experience, Specht (2013), found that "teachers who meet the diverse needs of their students are more likely to have children and youth in their classrooms who perceive school, themselves, and each other favourably" (p. 18). For Crocker and Dibbon (2008), Canadian teachers are expected to have the capacity to teach diverse students, collaborate, do research work, and to use technology in the classroom.

Theoharis and Causton-Theoharis (2011) developed a pre-designed inclusive lesson-planning template for PTs to use during practicum. Over 80% of PTs who participated in their study found the template helpful in developing their learning about inclusion and in understanding a variety of instructional techniques (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2011). With the growing demands of inclusive teaching, Wang and Fitch (2010) investigated co-teaching in teacher education. They claimed that "although both inclusion and collaboration models have been in practice for two decades, few currently employed teachers have received specific training" in co-teaching (p. 113). Co-teaching is a supportive approach through which two teachers work collaboratively in the same classroom sharing instruction, planning, and management of classroom activities (Wang & Fitch, 2010). In Italy, Bartolo (2010) studied how an e-learning module can develop collaborative practices among PTs. His study showed that the module has offered PTs a chance to engage in a socially constructed learning which is a significant aspect of teachers' success in 21st century classrooms.

By examining the literature around teacher education and inclusive education within the Canadian and international contexts, it was evident that preparing teachers for inclusive teaching continues to present organizational and practical challenges in teacher education programs and schools respectively. Thus, future teacher education programs and based on the literature, need to be well-designed around inclusivity. This warrants that PTs will attain the knowledge they need to perform practices that reflect an appreciation for student diversity through the establishment of inclusive and welcoming learning environments in schools (Rose & Garner, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

In this study, I use the lens of Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) that is situated in the field of organizational studies. Sensemaking theory accounts to the socio-cultural context of organizations and how context impacts the construction of meaning making among the individuals involved (Weick, 1995). Brown et al. (2008) define sensemaking as a process of interpretation and meaning production during which individuals, the future teachers according to this study, reflect on phenomena that are relevant to them in their own context. In the current study, these phenomena refer to the various learning experiences about inclusive education among 12 PTs of one Ontario teacher education program. In Weick's (1979) view, the meanings that individuals make about a particular experience, "is massively conditioned by the context or field in which it happens to be

embedded, the inputs being processed, the cycles available, and the interpretations that are acceptable and unacceptable at that point of time” (p. 144). That is, the meanings that PTs make about their inclusion teaching and learning are indeed subject to their experiences in schools during practicum as well as at the university classroom. Relatedly, Coburn and Talbert (2006) maintain that Sensemaking theory examines how individuals’ belief systems are shaped by their organizational context, namely the structure of the teacher education program according to this study. Therefore, the context of the program becomes an underlying element that dictates how PTs conceptualize and value their readiness to enact inclusive teaching in their future teaching career.

Weber and Glynn (2006) tell us that Sensemaking theory scrutinizes processes that take place at the micro-level which may include teaching, learning, and knowledge construction. As Sensemaking theory emphasizes the role of context in meaning construction, it becomes crucial to understand how practicum and the university classroom, as two related but different learning contexts, inform pre-service teacher preparation for inclusive teaching. In the view of Brown et al. (2008), accepting the idea “that sensemaking involves processes of narrativization (narrative-making) permits nuanced investigation of the extent to which individuals... agree, share, disagree and contest understandings” (p. 1039). This is because we humans tend to make sense of the social world that surrounds us using “jointly negotiated narratives” (Currie & Brown, 2003, p. 564). By using Sensemaking theory (Weick et al., 2005), a holistic and context-informed understanding of pre-service teacher preparation for the inclusive classroom has been achieved by linking future teachers’ beliefs about inclusion with the interpretations of their experiences in the examined program.

Methodology

A qualitative single case study design was deployed to conduct this study. Robson (2002) defined case study as the “strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular phenomenon within its real-life context” (p. 178). For Yin (2014), case study is a suitable method of inquiry “in situations where (1) the main research questions are ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, (2) a researcher has little or no control over behavioral events, and (3) the focus of study is a contemporary phenomenon” (p. 2). For Stake (2005), a researcher needs to choose a case that allows for a meaningful learning and one that is accessible. Further, a qualitative case study involves the analysis and the description of “a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (Merriam, 1998, p. xiii). For this study, the phenomenon is PTs’ perspectives about their preparation for inclusive teaching in one Ontario teacher education program.

Methods

To better understand an issue or concern of a current phenomenon, Creswell (2013) contends that a case study researcher depends on multiple sources to collect detailed information over a given period of time. For the purpose of this research, these resources included in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 PTs, as well as the analysis of two recent inclusive education policy documents issued by the OME. These two documents are *Equity and inclusive education in Ontario schools: Guidelines for policy development and implementation: realizing the promise of diversity* (OME, 2014b) and *Ontario’s Education Equity Action Plan (OEEAP)* (OME, 2017).

It is worth noting here that these documents were not used as major data sources for the study, as evidenced in the research questions, but rather as guides to help in (a) the conceptualization of inclusion and its practical aspects in schools, (b) assisting in the development of the interview questions, and (c) the identification of codes and themes from the participants' data. The analysis of these documents revealed important themes that are relevant to the study purpose including (a) current challenges of inclusive teaching in schools, (b) students' diversity in Ontario classrooms, (c) teachers' role in eliminating systematic barriers for students' success, and (d) frameworks for inclusive teaching.

The members of the Research Ethics Board (REB) of the research site have reviewed this study and an ethics approval was obtained. Following the receipt of the ethics approval, participants were communicated with and invited for an in-person or virtual interview.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The study participants were 12 pre-service teachers (PTs) from the 2017 and 2018 cohorts who were attending their second year of the examined teacher education program. Only second-year PTs were selected for this study as they had more theoretical and practical experience in the program compared to their first-year counterparts. The education background of the participants included science, arts, engineering, English, and media studies. Professionally, many of these participants have been engaged in educational as well as non-educational professions prior to joining the teacher education program. These professions included teaching English as Second Language (ESL) in international schools, business administration, library services, marketing, automotive technology, public relations, and media services. To maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, their names were replaced with alphanumeric codes such as PT1 which will be referring to pre-service teacher 1.

Merriam (1998) informs us that in qualitative research, sample selection is usually “purposeful and small as opposed to the larger, more random sampling of quantitative research” (p. 8). Purposeful sampling means that participants are selected based on the significant knowledge they have about the study, particularly if the aim of the study is not to generalize the study's results, but to explore a given phenomenon in depth (Etikan et al., 2016), hence the use of purposeful sampling in this study. Furthermore, using a criterion purposive sampling technique in selecting the study participants was crucial (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Patton (1990) believes that “information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 169). Consequently, choosing PTs who are completing their second year of the teacher education program was the appropriate technique to use.

Data Analysis

For Patton (2002), data analysis in case study design tends to follow a particular pattern in which the researcher collects, organizes, and analyzes the data in ways that help in the construction of a systematic and in-depth understanding of the case. Collecting the participants' data and its organization and analysis were all driven by the research questions, the scholarly literature, the theoretical framework adopted, as well as the reviewed inclusive education policy documents.

Data analysis (Miles et al., 2014) of the participants' responses included two stages. During the first stage, multiple readings for each participant's data were conducted to identify codes that

reflect the purpose of the study. These codes included (a) beliefs and values towards inclusive education, (b) perspectives on inclusive teaching in schools through practicum, (c) inclusion as a collaborative practice, (d) reference to inclusive education policies, and (e) challenges of learning about inclusion in the teacher education program. During the second stage, a cross-case analysis technique (Patton, 2002) was adopted to identify similarities and differences in the codes created across all participants' data. This two-stage analysis was helpful to uncover themes that were pertinent to this study and assist in the interpretation of the data.

Results

PTs were asked about their familiarity with inclusive education, inclusion policy principles, how inclusion can be incorporated into one's practices, and how they make sense of their learning about teaching diverse learners in the inclusive classroom. Additional inquiries included the role of the program's structure (e.g., university classroom instruction and practicum at schools) in preparing PTs to practice inclusion, the challenges they believe may encounter in the inclusive classroom, and how future teacher education programming can mitigate these challenges.

Reflecting on the research questions, the literature reviewed, the policy documents examined, as well as the multiple readings of participants' data, three main themes emerged from the two-stage analysis followed in this study. These themes are (a) conceptualizing the means for successful inclusive teaching, (b) the organizational structure of the teacher education program: Constraints and possibilities, and (c) the practicum as a lived inclusion experience. The study aimed to understand the perspectives of 12 PTs in one Ontario teacher education program towards their preparation for inclusive teaching and how their program's current organizational and structural design impact such preparation.

Conceptualizing the Means for Successful Inclusive Teaching

PTs brought forward the qualities that teachers need to express in the inclusive classroom. Their perspectives revealed various practices that, if implemented, would establish promising learning environments in diverse K-12 education. PTs believed that the inclusive teacher needs to be proactive, observant, respectful, as well as a "quick thinker with foresight capacity" (PT6). PT2 said, "my first thought is 'awareness.' Being aware of inclusivity is a major key to define someone as an inclusive teacher. The second key is to actually practice it." For PTs, although teachers in the inclusive classroom cannot anticipate all students' needs, they tend to create different opportunities and organize various activities that help all learners achieve. The study found that PTs had a consensus about the right for all learners to feel welcomed and supported in the inclusive classroom (OME, 2014a, 2014b; UNESCO, 1994) regardless of their various backgrounds and needs.

Collaboration for PTs is a key for a successful inclusive teaching. For them, teachers need to be working together to ensure that students are feeling supported and having their diverse needs met. Reflecting one of the principles of the OEEAP policy (OME, 2017), PT11 said, "every student matter and every student needs to be included, no matter where they are coming from or what issues they might be dealing with." According to PTs, inclusive teaching practice happens when teachers are responsive and capable of managing their classrooms. Based on their practicum experience, PTs claimed that classroom management is really challenging due to the existence of

various needs among diverse learners, and the amount of documentation practicing teachers are required to do.

Schools, as described by PTs, play a key role in making education more accessible and meaningful by building on students' different cultures and experiences to create inclusive and welcoming classrooms. Referring to the OEEAP (OME, 2017), PT6 said that it is "a two-way street that was meant to help, include, and benefit everyone." Further, PTs believed that having educational assistants in the classroom constitutes a contributing factor to successful inclusion. However, based on their practicum experience, PTs noted that most schools appear to have a low number of educational assistants, a fact that determines the extent to which inclusion support can be provided for those who need it the most. Emphasizing the significant role of educational assistants, PT4 said, "one person can only do so much and supporting all learners' needs in the classroom can't be done alone, it has to be teamwork otherwise teachers become frustrated and get burned out." Calling upon the OME to secure more funding to support inclusive practices in schools, PT5 claimed, "we are learning about all the support that we will have, while in the real world, the funding is not always there." This funding, as exemplified in the responses of PTs, is attributed to the need for hiring more educational assistants and providing additional educational resources.

The Organizational Structure of the Teacher Education Program: Constraints and Possibilities

The organizational structure of the examined program includes compulsory and elective theory courses, up to 200 hours of practical experience in schools, a compulsory community-based field experience component, as well as various professional learning opportunities and education workshops that are offered onsite.

When asked about their knowledge of Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan (OME, 2017), most PTs believed that their teacher education program did not completely laid it out in all its courses. For them, the courses on inclusive education and social foundations are the only ones that have mainly addressed the OEEAP, its principles, and guidelines.

To better support pre-service teacher preparation for inclusive education, PTs believed that their program needs to offer more critical discussions about education policy contexts in schools, current inclusive practices, and how to adopt these practices in the classroom. Addressing structural constraints in their teacher education program, PT4 said, we are "just scratching the surface" due to time limits and the high number of compulsory courses. The number of assignments and readings required in each course in the program, as PTs reported, prevents them from having those deep discussions about inclusive teaching in schools. PT4 said, "Everyone is doing an assignment after an assignment and when you finish these assignments, there are other assignments waiting for you."

Additional constraints, as expressed by the PTs, included a lack of emphasis on inclusive assessment tools that teachers can use in their future practice and the limited opportunities to engage with these tools during practicum. Suggesting a change in the teacher education program curriculum, PT7 noted that inclusive education needs to be the focal point of all courses in the teacher education program because beliefs, attitudes, as well as the prevailing discourses around inclusion (Sharma et al., 2008) collectively affect the development of competent and mindful inclusive teachers.

The Practicum as a Lived Inclusion Experience

The practicum component of the teacher education program allows PTs to have a hands-on experience interacting with diverse learners, realizing the various existing needs of the latter, and in connecting theory with practice.

PTs believed that their preparation for inclusion happens in schools rather than at the university classroom. “You don’t really realize how it works until you are in the practicum itself. The practicum I think is the big thing for preparing people to practice inclusion” (PT2). University classrooms, as indicated by the PTs, focus on teaching key words and terms that relate to inclusion and how to create an inclusive classroom from an administrative point of view. Looking back on their experience in the university classroom, PTs hoped their teacher education program could have offered them more training on how to develop responsive assessment strategies for diverse learners and design inclusive lesson plans.

A successful practicum experience for PTs is subject to two factors. These are (a) the associate teachers who supervise and mentor PTs during their practicum, and (b) the overall classroom context. Associate teachers are very influential individuals and a great source of knowing about how to teach in the classroom (Rusznyak & Walton, 2017). This is exemplified by what PT4 said, “without that experience, without the associate teacher, I don’t think I would be ready.” Further, having the practicum in diverse classroom contexts, PTs believe, allows future teachers to better understand different strategies that relate to inclusive teaching and learning. They added that being in direct contact with diverse students at schools is a key for how-to-do inclusion. “I feel like I am more and more aware of inclusion while on practicum because I am with the students” (PT11).

When associate teachers modeled inclusive teaching, PTs felt more aware of inclusion and ready to practice it. In this regard PT1 said, “we gain the skills pretty much from watching our associate teachers” working and supporting their diverse students. To promote learning about inclusion in teacher education, PTs urged their program to invest in topics around creativity and innovation for inclusive teaching and to offer PTs more professional training on how to engage and support diverse learners.

We are focusing on eight different subjects and we really don’t have the time to focus on inclusivity. We need to think about our priorities; inclusivity must be priority, and I don’t think it is right now; that what scares us as teacher candidates; we don’t feel we are prepared. (PT4)

In turn, PT3 recommended the program to consider offering more specialty courses about religions, cultures, and ethnicities to aid in supporting future teachers’ readiness to enact and further value inclusive teaching approaches.

Discussion

Following the presentation of the study findings, it becomes necessary to elaborate on the PTs’ perspectives towards their preparation for inclusive teaching. Danforth and Naraian (2015) believe that inclusion is a practice that is embedded in the complex political aspects of education. Therefore, instead of conceptualizing inclusion as an outcome to be attained, it should be viewed “as a process that is always ongoing, continual, and by extension, unfinished” (Danforth &

Naraian, 2015, p. 72). Such a process needs to maintain an understanding that inclusive schooling is a practice that supports the learning and well-being of all individuals involved and contributes to building democratic societies (Danforth & Naraian, 2015).

Informed by the literature review and the theory adopted, the analysis revealed shared meanings among the study participants that all learners have the right to feel welcomed, supported, and to be viewed as valued members of the inclusive classroom. Those meanings (Weick, 1979) were constructed based on PTs' experience in the teacher education program as well as their own wider social and cultural contexts.

Conforming to previous studies (Alborno, 2017; Johnstone & Chapman, 2009; Vekeman et al., 2015) and exemplified in the participants' responses, inclusive teaching in schools remains complex and contextually situated. That is, successful inclusion for all depends on two major factors (a) teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and lived experiences with inclusion, and (b) the role of the governing educational institutions (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Nevin et al., 2009; Slee, 2010) in offering various forms of resources that support classrooms' inclusive practices. Arguably, PTs' readiness for inclusive teaching is shaped by their teacher education program. However, the findings reflected that inclusion practice is not yet central to all courses and discourses in the examined program. Regarding the governing institutions, funding as addressed in the literature and by the study participants, is substantial for hiring more educational assistants. By all means, these assistants can ultimately help in easing off some of the responsibilities of classroom teachers by providing one-on-one support for some learners and assisting in classroom instruction, planning, and management (Poon-McBrayer & Wong, 2013; Vorapanya & Dunlap, 2014). Consequently, regular teachers will experience less frustrations and susceptibility for burnout in meeting the demands of inclusive teaching and their diverse learners.

PTs were found concerned about the curriculum content of their teacher education program. They believed that all courses should have fewer assignments and more space for critical discussions about inclusion and assessment practices. This finding resonated with previous studies that claimed the lack of research-informed assessment tools in schools as a challenge to the practice of inclusive teaching (Forlin, 2010a; Kelly et al., 2014). Thus, the examined program's curriculum seems to be overtly centered on the theoretical and administrative aspects of inclusion (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Forlin & Chambers, 2011) rather than on how to enact inclusive teaching in diverse classroom settings.

This current study proposes that the teacher education program would benefit from a change in its organizational structure in ways that align with the current needs and expectations of inclusive teaching. Perhaps, offering PTs some inclusion-focused workshops about assessment and instruction by experienced inclusion and diversity professionals would be helpful. Thus, the program's personnel should rethink the program's priorities to ensure that future PTs will gain a meaningful learning experience they can trust, and in turn utilize in their future teaching career.

A great emphasis was placed upon the practicum context in this study. This includes (a) associate teachers who supervise PTs during practicum, and (b) the nature of the classroom context. Both factors were viewed by PTs as very influential in learning about inclusion, a finding that resonated with previous studies in this area (see Rogers-Adkinson & Fridley, 2016; Rusznyak & Walton, 2017; Sharma et al., 2008). It is worth noting here that the teacher education program, as shared by PTs, does not have the luxury to place PTs with associate teachers who have specialization in inclusive education. This is due to teacher certification requirements set by the Ontario College of Teachers. However, it can be argued that a given teacher education program has the autonomy to decide upon what schools can serve as potential diversity-oriented sites for

the program's practicum component. Choosing diversity-oriented schools will allow PTs to get firsthand experience with diverse learners before they officially embark on their future teaching career (Coburn & Talbert, 2006; Florian et al., 2010). As direct contact with diverse learners is of high significance in teaching and learning about diversity, this study recommends extending the practicum duration as part of rethinking the program's organizational structure. This extension will grant PTs more time to engage with and learn about diverse learners and their evolving needs, affording the former more opportunities to put the theoretical knowledge they have obtained into practice.

Conclusion

This study offered the perspectives of 12 pre-service teachers from one Ontario teacher education program towards their preparation for inclusive teaching. The findings may be used to inform other teacher education programs that are situated in similar contexts. In particular, the findings showed that the curriculum structure of the examined program needs to be more practice-based oriented and responsive to the current needs of the inclusive classroom. Further, the study emphasized the significance of the curriculum content and practicum context in how PTs develop their understanding of inclusion and make sense of their future teaching practices. Moreover, the study recommended the examined program to consider an organizational change by rethinking the means that render pre-service teacher preparation for inclusive teaching more meaningful. Such a change would necessitate the invitation of those involved in the program's curricular development to further collaborate and create a more comprehensive and coherent curricular design that greatly serve inclusive teaching in schools. Such a step has the potential to reposition teacher education as a key pillar in the establishment of more inclusive and equitable learning environments in today's K-12 education, particularly during such unprecedented times namely, COVID-19 when teaching and learning are being redefined.

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