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Perceptions of Inclusion in Australian Schools

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study explores educational professionals' perceptions of inclusive practices in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, with a focus on specialized roles such as learning support coordinators, teachers, and school learning support officers.

Methods: Using surveys and interviews, the research investigates how inclusion is conceptualized, implemented, and its perceived impact on students.

Results: Findings highlight significant inconsistencies in understanding inclusion, with some participants associating it exclusively with students with additional needs, while others embrace a broader philosophy. Despite general support for inclusive practices, challenges persist, including limited resources, insufficient professional development, and variability in leadership support. Comparisons with international research underscore shared challenges in operationalizing inclusive education globally.

Conclusions: This paper proposes a framework for reconceptualizing inclusion as a universal pedagogical philosophy and offers actionable recommendations for bridging the gap between policy and practice. Implications for teacher training and professional development are also discussed.

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Introduction

Although inclusive education has not been conclusively defined (Graham & Slee, 2008), and in Australia, there is no single definition that defines the agenda for the country, in NSW, the Department of Education, the largest employer of teachers in the country, has released an Inclusive Education Statement for Students with a Disability, which defines inclusive education as:

> All students, regardless of disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation or faith, 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 (2020, p. 1).

Aligned with this Statement, despite its title, the notion of inclusion within education is a policy that applies to all students, not only those with a disability. Inclusion should be thought of not as something done for students who are in some way different from the norm, but rather it refers to all students, who by the nature of their uniqueness in the world, bring their own set of circumstances to their learning and have their own set of needs that should be met by the teacher and, more broadly, the educational institution.

The issue with the Statement, and more broadly, various inclusive education policies and procedures around the country, is the lack of a standard definition and clarity around inclusion. For example, in NSW, although the language of the official Statement seemingly includes all students, the title denotes that it is intended for students with disabilities, which seems exclusionary rather than inclusionary. One could argue that because the Statement is entitled Inclusive Education Statement for Students with a Disability, the inclusionary measures indicated in the definition apply only to those with disabilities, despite the mention of ethnicity, faith, gender, sexual orientation etc. This ambiguity can distort educators' views regarding the meaning of inclusion, whom it is for, and to whom it applies.

This paper presents a small study into how inclusive practices are perceived and implemented by educators who work in schools. Perceptions were sought from a diverse set of educational professionals working in specific school roles related to supporting students with special or additional needs.

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Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education (IE) has been gaining popularity in the western educational context since the concept was informally introduced at the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990). The message at that time was that adaptable programming and pedagogy tailored to context could allow all students, regardless of disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation or faith, to access educational opportunities (UNESCO, 1990). Following on from the world conference, the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) furthered the IE agenda by proposing that,

Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.

These ideas from the early 1990s have led many educational institutions to rethink their structural policies concerning children's differences and how these differences are handled and managed within the educational system. According to the World Bank and the OECD, education is a human right and a predictor of later success in life; this forms the foundational premise of IE (Hoff & Pandley, 2004; OECD, 2010).

In Australia, a society with an increasingly diverse population (Anderson & Boyle, 2015), schools are experiencing increasing levels of disadvantaged students (Smyth, 2013), with over 12% of all students presenting with additional educational needs (Dempsey & Davies, 2013). There is also an increasing level of diagnosed learning difficulties (Gonski et al., 2011); and high levels of accountability and standardization within its school system (Blackmore, 2009); this is at a time when the philosophy of IE within schools "is at risk of disappearing" (Anderson & Boyle, 2015).

The notion of IE is essential to ensure that all children have the opportunity to participate in education. According to Dixon and Verenikina (2007), IE is grounded in social justice, and Snow and Powell (2012) suggest it can break cycles of disadvantage. Despite the abundant research advocating the benefits, very few systems have effectively implemented IE practices (Allan, 2011).

Inclusive Education in Australia

Although inclusive education (IE) has yet to be conclusively defined in Australia, various states and territories have policies regarding inclusive educational practices. An extensive review of the

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literature by Anderson et al. (2014) found three consistent components of IE: all students, regardless of circumstance, must be successfully participating, achieving and being valued within the regular classroom in their local school.

The Australian Disability Standards of Education (2005) define inclusive practices in Australia. Sections three and five of the Standards ensure reasonable adjustments for students and that all students have the opportunity to participate, as fully as possible, in the classroom and school activities in consultation with the student or advocate (Australian Disability Standards of Education, 2005). At the national level in education, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) (2015) addresses students with special learning needs in several standard descriptors. Specifically, focus area 1.5 (Standard 1, descriptor 5) addresses differentiated teaching to meet specific learning needs across the full range of abilities; 1.6 requires strategies to support full participation of students with a disability; and 4.1 addresses inclusive participation of all students. Other relevant standard descriptors and focus areas address, more generally, areas related to students' learning: 1.1 and 1.2 address intellectual development, characteristics of students and how students learn, respectively.

Additionally, in NSW, all teachers, during their initial training, are required, under the New South Wales Education and Standards Authority (NESA) (2015), to undertake at least one course dedicated to special needs education. Furthermore, NESA mandates several priority areas that initial teacher education (ITE) providers must address within their program. There are nine elements of the priority area, "students with special educational needs," all of which must be met within the ITE program.

The issue in Australia, and NSW more specifically, is that the main point of IE focuses on students with a disability or a learning modality outside the mainstream, as opposed to being a policy or concept that broadly applies to all students. Despite the Statement on IE, much of the policy relies on the terminology of special needs education instead of inclusivity. Similarly, the APST identify what teachers must achieve and maintain within their practice. While Standard 1.4 requires teachers to differentiate teaching across the full range of abilities, which would seem commensurate with an inclusive approach, 1.6 specifies strategies to support the full participation of students with a disability. If authentic IE practices were the goal, it would make 1.6 superfluous as students of all abilities, including those with disabilities, would be addressed. Therefore,

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including 1.6 signifies that the Standards view students with a disability as different enough to require an additional standard descriptor that caters for students across the full range of abilities. The only Standard that mentions inclusivity, 4.1, does so regarding student participation, as opposed to learning and teaching, which further confuses the understanding of IE.

Teachers and educational leaders are generally aware of the benefits of inclusive practices (Boyle et al., 2013; Ferriday & Cantali, 2020); however, this presumes that teachers and educators understand the purpose and intention of inclusion. It is evident that the views of inclusion espoused in the standards and NSW are counter to the prevailing view of IE identified earlier and articulated by Florian (2015), who defines inclusive pedagogy as not denying individual differences, but rather "assumes that differences are an ordinary aspect of the human condition" (p. 10). In contrast to the NSW view, the more widely held perspective is that inclusive practices aim to be inclusive of all students; however, how educators define inclusiveness indicates how we approach a student or group of students.

This paper proposes a universal, inclusive pedagogy framework that recognizes inclusion as a right for all students to promote equity and diversity based on three practical pillars: teacher preparedness, whole school/system approaches, and resource allocation. As a result, this research seeks to ascertain how teachers define, understand and implement inclusion in their schools and will be analyzed through the lens of this framework.

Material and Methods

This study employed a case study research design (Stake, 2000) to ascertain the understanding and implementation of inclusion and inclusive practices in schools and their perceived impact on students. The research took place in two phases, surveys and interviews. Learning support coordinators, learning support teachers and school learning support officers (SLSOs) were asked to complete a survey about practices and perceptions of inclusion in their schools. This survey informed follow-up interviews in which one participant in each of the roles identified was asked about inclusion, inclusive practices, and the impact those practices have on students.

The snowballing method was used (Goodman, 1961), whereby surveys were sent to three professional colleagues who work in inclusive education for initial testing and feedback. Once feedback was received on the applicability and general relevance of the questions, those colleagues

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forwarded the final version of the survey to their professional colleagues in similar roles. Those who received the link to the survey were also asked to share it within their networks. This technique was employed as an efficient way to recruit participants who would be required to have specialist roles and are likely members of specific networks.

While the limited sample size for the survey was small (n=42), the purpose of the survey was to inform the interview rather than be generalizable to the population. The data gathered in the survey identified how inclusivity and its practices were understood and allowed for more specific interview questions about the impact of those practices on staff and students. The interviews provided a depth of understanding about those perceptions and practices that impacted the students. Data from the surveys were analyzed thematically using simple thematic analysis on Qualtrics. The thematic analysis process included iterative coding and cross-checking with interview data, ensuring consistent identification of themes.

Phase two included interviewing one learning support coordinator, one learning support teacher and one SLSO who self-selected on the survey to participate in the interview process. Only five survey participants agreed to participate in phases two and three were chosen randomly from the five. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant in person and were audio-recorded. Detailed notes were taken during the interview corresponding to each identified theme in the survey phase.

The data analysis occurred in two distinct phases. The first phase was the simple thematic analysis of the survey data for emerging trends and themes (Mertens, 2005). The second phase was writing a narrative for each interview, which allowed further analysis (Denscombe, 2010). Triangulation of survey and interview data enhances the credibility of findings. Additionally, participant feedback was incorporated to refine themes. Notes were taken in the interview by the themes identified in the survey data. The analysis of the interviews (n=3) entailed replaying the recording and taking additional notes to ensure nothing was missed. The additional notes aided in conceptualizing the data through “casing” (Neuman, 2011), after which a draft narrative was composed for each interview to preserve the essence of the data. Once the three narratives were written, progressive focusing (Simons, 2009) was used to identify relevant themes and common issues of inclusive practices and impact. Finally, generalizations across identified themes were used to evaluate against policy and best practices as identified in the literature.

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Limitations

Due to the limited sample, the results are not generalizable, which is common in small-scale case studies (Yin, 2009). However, the purpose of the study is to justify further research in the area of inclusion, inclusive practices and the various conceptualizations of the terms and how that variety impacts students. Additionally, the study is solely focused in NSW, Australia, which may not reflect practices and perceptions in other Australian jurisdictions nor the world. The participants are also predominantly specialists in inclusion, which may bias results toward a narrower operational understanding rather than broader classroom perspectives. However, despite these limitations, the survey results indicate much inconsistency and contradiction in the ways inclusion is understood and its intended purposes. This study will need to be read with the understanding that context is paramount, but it is likely that the results would be more, not less variable, with a more extensive and diverse sample.

Results

Survey

There were 42 respondents to the survey. There were five inclusion coordinators, ten learning support teachers and 27 SLSOs. Every school has a different ratio of learning support teachers to SLSOs, but the split of survey respondents could represent a typical school. In the schools where the three interview participants worked, there was one coordinator, two to three learning support teachers and 8-10 SLSOs, and all SLSOs were part-time. Participants were asked one open-ended question at the start of the survey, which asked them to articulate their understanding of inclusion. Only 26 survey participants answered this question, and the results indicate that the conceptualizations of inclusion fell into two categories: those that thought that purpose of inclusion was to provide the necessary resources and attention to students with additional learning needs (n=13) and those who conceptualized inclusion as applying to all students according to their varying needs (n=13). It was not surprising that much of the rest of the survey seemed to align under these two trends. Nine questions could be used to correlate this conceptualization. On all those questions, 50% of responses depicted inclusion as primarily for students with disabilities or additional learning needs and the other half considered inclusion applicable to all students.

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There were divergent views regarding how the practice of inclusion manifests in the schools where participants work. Fifty per cent of participants felt the students with special or additional needs monopolized teacher time in an inclusive classroom environment; approximately sixty per cent (n=25) felt that behavior issues were a significant issue when students had special or additional learning needs, which took more teacher time; and, ~70% (n=24) felt that the time spent with students with special or additional learning needs in an inclusive classroom, whether for learning or behavior, came at the expense of the other students in those classes.

These findings correspond to the split in understanding the purpose of inclusion; however, other responses are contradictory. For example, almost all participants reported that it is more challenging to have students with special or additional learning needs in an inclusive classroom (n=39 [~93%]), and 33 (~79%) reported that they believe specialist learning environments are better suited for students with special or additional learning needs. However, most respondents (n=29 [~70%]) also reported that they thought inclusion worked in their school. How can inclusion work in their school if almost all participants feel that inclusion is problematic and that students with additional needs are better off in specialist learning environments? This problem became a significant point for clarification during the interview.

Concerning how they, as specialists in inclusion, are supported, there was a trend where each level (coordinator, teacher, SLSO) felt supported only by the group above directly above, e.g., the coordinator felt supported by school leadership; the LST felt supported by the coordinator, and the SLSO felt supported by the LST. On the other hand, teachers and SLSOs did not feel supported by leadership and, additionally, did not feel supported outside of the network, i.e. other non-specialist teachers. Most (n=29) also reported that inclusion was only understood by about half of non-specialist staff; however, when the two different conceptualizations of inclusion are accounted for, this correlation becomes negligible, i.e., it could be zero or 100% because of the 50% result between the two different conceptualizations of inclusion. Additionally, ~70% of the survey respondents felt that teachers have a good level of training in inclusive practices; however, when clarified in the interview, it turned out that this expectation was based on teachers' initial training, not specific compulsory or optional professional development. This outcome was further confirmed with responses regarding how the specialists felt about other teachers' understandings of inclusion: ~79% (n=33) reported that other teachers understand the purpose of inclusion; ~60%

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(n=25) believe other teachers support inclusive practices (support inclusion); and, only ~29% (n=12) are competent in implementing inclusive practices. Although specialist teachers believe that other teachers have an adequate level of training and a good understanding, they think only slightly more than half support inclusive practices, and half of that number can effectively implement those practices.

Finally, the results were overwhelmingly positive when asked about the impact on students and overall support for inclusion. Ninety per cent of respondents indicated that inclusion has a positive effect on all students and that inclusion has wide-ranging support from school leadership (n=37 [~88%]), parents (n=34 [81%]), and the school community generally (n=38 [~91%]). In addition, every participant (100%) strongly agreed that students with special or additional learning needs feel supported by the inclusive practices.

Interview

The interview sought to clarify and further the understanding regarding the implementation of inclusion and the impact on students. For the interviews (n=3), there was one deputy principal, who was the head of well-being (WB); one learning support teacher (LST) and one SLSO (SLSO). WB had been in the role for over five years; been at the school in a leadership position for over 17 years; had approximately 25 years of teaching experience; and, their highest degree was a Master's Degree in leadership. LST has about ten years of teaching experience and has only had the role of LST for 1.5 years. They have a BEd and a Graduate Certificate in Special Needs Education. SLSO has been in their support role for almost two years and is currently a university student in an unrelated field. The background of SLSO was similar to other SLSOs who responded to the survey in that fewer than half had any related experience.

The three interviews took place online via video software and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The three themes that emerged from the surveys were the focus areas of the interviews: the conceptualization of inclusion, the implementation of inclusion, and the impact of inclusion on students. The three interviewees had trouble articulating the concept of inclusion from the perspective of their school. The LST and SLSO had personal ideas about inclusion but could not express how the school conceptualized it. SLSO said, "I know inclusion is about getting the students who need help into mainstream classrooms and giving support, but I'm not sure what the school thinks." LST noted that the school did not have a "comprehensive policy about inclusion,"

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instead, the learning support team dictated how "students with additional needs would be included." LST went on to say that although inclusion is meant to be about "recognizing the needs of all students, the school just doesn't see it that way."

On the other hand, WB did not speak from a personal perspective but said that the school had "comprehensive policies on inclusion and that they were followed to the tee." WB added, "all students here understand that inclusion is about the recognition and acceptance of difference." When probed about that difference, WB referred to students with disabilities, students' cultural differences, Indigenous students and students with other learning needs.

The implementation of inclusion was where there was little to no consistency in the three interviews. WB discussed the learning support team's weekly meetings to discuss various students' needs and how the team devised strategies for each student. When probed on how that occurred, they said it was up to the team leader to implement the strategy; the team leader was a learning support teacher. They added that the process "typically entails a PEP [personalized education plan], a PD [professional development] session for the teachers and a follow up with the student and parents.

LST felt that the lack of a school plan for inclusion hindered the implementation of effective practices, which "makes my job really hard." They continued, "inclusion here is really reactive. We don't have enough staff or SLSOs to provide the support required, which makes implementing a proactive plan really difficult. I've only been in the role for a little over a year, and they've asked me to make a plan, but I have no time." LST reported that the increase in students needing support has continued to grow in every school they know, but qualified staff are tough to get. They also said that the lack of leadership support made them feel guilty that students were not receiving as much support as they needed.

SLSO had a different perspective on the implementation of practice. They thought the support provided was adequate: "I spend a lot of time with each of the three students I help. I'm in the classroom providing support for the teacher and helping one student throughout an entire lesson." When asked if this was common practice, LST responded, "I assume this is happening for all the students who need it, but from what I can see in the classes, there does seem to be other students who need extra support and aren't necessarily getting it." In addition, SLSO reported that they had a good rapport with the teachers, which helps, but considering the part-time nature of their work

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and the amount of support the students need, they "have no idea how the teachers or the students cope when that in-class support isn't there."

The last part of the interview focused on the impact of inclusive practices on students, and there was near unanimity that inclusion was beneficial for all students. WB said the school had seen "vast improvements in student welfare, school and home partnerships, and outcomes for students through their inclusive policies." However, when asked about the improvements and how the partnerships impacted students, there was less eagerness to respond in detail. WB talked about the learning support team again and the "incredible work they were doing" but was short on specifics. They did say that there were noticeable improvements on NAPLAN (National Assessment Program, Literacy and Numeracy) for many of the students "with needs." When asked if standardised test scores were how they measured the success of inclusion, they said it was one measure but not the most important. The last question of the interview focused on whole-school well-being as a result of the comprehensive school policy on inclusion that they mentioned earlier. WB reported that in internal surveys conducted at the school, there were "statistically significant improvements in overall well-being at the school that can be directly associated with the inclusion policy," but they would not specify further.

LST and SLSO had positive outlooks on how inclusion impacted students in their respective schools. LST said that despite the hard work, they saw "significant improvements in the students who were receiving additional support in the classroom." They continued and said that the support officers mainly provided the in-class support but that the teachers were "really supportive of the practices and aimed to help the support officers." The only negative from LST was that they didn't have the capacity to provide more support, "the ideas are getting out there – the students get what inclusion is, the teachers are super-supportive, but we are just so short-staffed it makes it hard." When explicitly asked about leadership, they reported wanting more support from school leadership, getting more staff and being more involved and proactive in whole-school inclusive practices and policy. SLSO, on the other hand, wasn't sure about the school or leadership but reported that they had a good relationship with the teachers. They also noted that the students seemed to understand that some got extra support and others didn't: "I guess that's what inclusion is all about, right? Understanding that it's about giving support to those who need it and accepting that." SLSO didn't add much about the impact on the school community because they mostly work

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one-on-one with students; however, they did say that the impact on the individual students was significant: “you can see the improvement week to week with these students, and you know it’s working because they improve much faster than the rest of the class. It’s a different level they are working from, but the improvement is faster.”

Discussion

Although this study and the resulting data are specific to NSW, Australia, the findings are similar to conceptualizations of inclusion in the US and UK, which also find that those conceptions often prioritize students with disabilities, neglecting broader diversity considerations (Florian, 2015; Allan, 2011). Additionally, resource constraints, lack of leadership support, and variability in teacher training are globally recurring issues (Bindhani & Gopinath, 2024). In many Scandinavian countries emphasize co-teaching and collaborative models, which contrast with the Australian reliance on support staff (Sundqvist et al., 2021). In many Asian contexts, inclusion is less embedded in policy, often driven by cultural norms rather than formalized frameworks (Hosshan et al., 2020).

Three themes emerged from the data that form the basis for the discussion: the variations in conceptualizing inclusion and inclusive practices, how inclusion is implemented, and the nature of the impact of inclusion on students. The three themes emerged from the survey data and became the focus of the interviews to elicit a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of inclusion.

The various conceptualizations of inclusion were a significant cause for the disparities in the other two themes. The conceptualization of inclusion directly correlates to its implementation and, to a lesser but still considerable degree, its impact on students. The variation in how inclusion is conceptualized is likely a historical artifact from the changes in terminology associated with educating a diverse student population. The term special needs education is still very much in the vernacular of teachers throughout NSW. The regulator, NESA, still refers to students with special educational needs, has specific Special Education teachers, and requires pre-service teachers to undertake one course in Special Education (NESA, 2019).

Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the education minister’s Statement on inclusion specifically targets students with a disability (Mitchell, 2021). Therefore, it is unsurprising that teachers, even specialists in this area, do not have a well-articulated conceptualization of inclusion that aligns

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with current research and practice. In policy documents in NSW, inclusion is almost always preceded or follows the term disability; however, when defined outside of these policies, it refers to all students (NSW DET, n.d.). In NSW, it seems that inclusion is a catch-all term and refers to the various policies regarding disability, cultural diversity, indigenous students, and English language learners (NSW DET, n.d.). Collectively the policies are inclusive, which in turn supports an inclusion conceptualization that aligns with the literature and best practice. The confusion likely arises because the term inclusion often appears alongside disability, such as in the minister's Statement, but is not used in the other policies that form part of the overall inclusion strategy.

The implementation of inclusion seemed to depend on staffing, how school leadership conceptualized and operationalized inclusion, and the students that were the beneficiaries of inclusion, which depended on the conceptualization. At the three different levels of specialists, there were stark differences in how each viewed implementing inclusive practices. At the top, WB viewed it as an operational process they oversaw. They had put procedures in place that were sufficient to support the practices that primarily depended on weekly meetings; however, a feedback circle was seemingly missing. The sessions focus on the process but not the outcomes. The strategy worked from their point of view because it was in place, not because there was evidence. This strategy seems to be a reactionary process, similar to the one LST reports in their interview. The reaction in WB's school is that teachers identify students and refer them to the team leader, who then reports to WB. That they have accepted the referral and put a plan into action equates to success from WB's perspective. LST admits the process in their school is reactionary but works fine for those students who receive support. However, they reported the primary challenge was having enough time and staff to provide the support required, which they attributed to a lack of resources and leadership.

Although WB and LST are in different schools, their narratives fit together. There is oversight of a process, but the specialist oversees the implementation of the process with limited resources and does what they can. It is difficult to call the policies inclusive as they only support students with the starkest need. According to all three interviewees, the students who are most likely to receive support are those with diagnosed problems or who present with learning difficulties or disabilities. SLSO's experience also fits within this framework. They reported positive experiences with the students with whom they work, but the support available is limited to those students who "show

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cause". In other words, those students with diagnosed disabilities, disorders or learning difficulties are first to receive support, and the resources available for other students are "severely limited" (LST).

The impact on students is the last theme, and the one impacted most by the previous two. The conceptualizations of inclusion, although varied, once operationalized, were specific to students with learning disabilities and difficulties. This is interesting considering the Department of Education's Inclusion Policy addresses: Aboriginal Student Support; multicultural education; English language learners; refugee students; disability learning and support; and anti-bullying (NSW DET, n.d.). This study does not claim that inclusion in schools is limited to a specific student population; however, none of the three interviewees nor any survey respondents, who are all inclusion specialists, reported any interventions for students who were refugees, multicultural or victims of bullying. There were data supporting the notion that students who did not have English as their first language would receive support, but this was clarified in the interview with LST. Students who do not have English as a first language receive support, not because of inclusion per se, but because it is viewed as a learning difficulty. Although there was a lot of support for the concept of inclusion for all students, there was little support for the idea that inclusive practices impacted students outside of those requiring support for specific learning needs.

This data confirms that the notion of the conceptualization, implementation and impact of inclusion has not changed with current research, literature and modern conceptualizations of what inclusion entails. The data from this study finds that there is variation and inconsistency in schools regarding inclusion, inclusive policy and the implementation and impact of practices that support inclusion.

Conclusions

Inclusion is a philosophical view that appreciates the differences of individuals and recognizes that all students bring their uniqueness to their education but also can be part of the learning community (Titone, 2005). The recognition of inclusion as a philosophy progresses the argument past that of practical debate about what can and cannot be done for students with additional needs. The flexible nature of teaching and a philosophical view of learning and teaching that supports and acknowledges the diversity of all learners as a social construct between the teacher and learner is

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essential in developing, formulating and maintaining an inclusive pedagogy that avoids a deficit view of learners with additional needs.

The findings of this study confer the need for further research into the conceptualization and implementation of inclusive practices in schools but also elucidates an additional problem of resource allocation. NSW is currently undergoing a teacher shortage problem, according to the NSW Teacher's Federation President (Gavrielatos quoted in Nilsson, 2022). The extent to which this is a problem is disputed, with the education minister admitting a shortage in some areas but denying it is a crisis (Mitchell quoted in Nilsson, 2022). However, regardless of whether the shortage is at a crisis level, according to government modelling, there will be a significant shortfall of teachers in NSW and nationally over the next few years (Rose & McGowan, 2022). Human resource allocation, specifically in dealing with the growing number of students who require learning support, was brought up in 90% of the survey responses and was a prominent issue in each interview.

While this study was not about resources, it becomes an essential issue if part of the reason effective inclusive practices are not being implemented is due to resource allocation. For example, WB mentioned that the number of students with diagnosed and undiagnosed issues had risen over the past few years but that the school was dealing with it and needed to hire more specialist staff. For LST, the lack of specialist staff was a primary concern, and they noted an extensive waiting list for learning support at their school. The implications for teacher training, professional development and leadership are clear. There is a need to incorporate inclusive pedagogy into teacher training, which should include differentiated instruction, universal design for learning and cultural responsiveness. Providing ongoing professional development to teachers that focus on practical classroom strategies that facilitate learning from diverse educational systems can help teachers incorporate successful strategies depending on context. For leadership, it is about fostering inclusive cultures and ensuring adequate resource allocation. The following are practical recommendations:

- Develop standardized, school/system-wide inclusion policies to reduce ambiguity in conceptualization and implementation.
- Increase investment in training to ensure consistency and competency in inclusive practices.

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- Foster stronger collaboration between classroom teachers and inclusion specialists to create cohesive teaching environments.
- Advocate for equitable resource distribution to address disparities in staffing and material support.
- Promote the adoption of evidence-based frameworks, such as UDL, for universal accessibility.

The notion of inclusion as a philosophy only penetrates to the surface. The specialists surveyed and interviewed understood and had positive views regarding inclusion and inclusive practices; however, the data emerging suggests that while there is intent, the rhetoric of inclusion does not match the reality of what is happening in schools. Inclusion as a philosophy foster and encourages a learning environment that prioritizes maximizing the learning potential of every student in light of their particular strengths and weaknesses. However, the findings here suggest that while the idea of inclusion is prevalent in practice, there is either a lack of resources or a lack of preparedness on the part of leadership to allocate the requisite resources towards inclusion and inclusive practices to meet student needs.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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