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SHORT REPORT



## In-service teachers' attitudes, concerns, efficacy and intentions to teach in inclusive classrooms: an international comparison of Australian and Italian teachers

Umesh Sharma<sup>a</sup>, Paola Aiello<sup>b</sup>, Erika Marie Pace<sup>b</sup>, Penny Round<sup>a</sup> and Pearl Subban<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Education, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia; <sup>b</sup>Department of Humanities, Philosophy and Education, University of Salerno, Salerno, Italy

### ABSTRACT

The paper examined whether in-service teachers from Australia to Italy differ in terms of their attitudes, concerns, efficacy beliefs and intentions to include learners with disabilities in their classrooms. An attempt was also made to determine predictors of the participants' intentions to include learners with disabilities in their classrooms. Participants for the study consisted of 153 Australian and 156 Italian in-service teachers. Results revealed that Italian teachers had significantly more positive attitudes, lower degree of concerns and higher level of intentions to implement inclusion in their classrooms. In both countries, attitudes and efficacy emerged as significant predictors of participants' intentions to include learners with disabilities in regular classrooms. Reasons that could explain differences in the teachers' beliefs from the two countries are explained using historical-cultural and legal frameworks prevalent in Australia and Italy. Implications of the findings for policy-makers, university teachers and researchers are presented that may have relevance in guiding the implementation of inclusive education in Australia, Italy and beyond.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Attitudes; intentions; inclusive education; Australia; Italy; cross-country comparisons

## Introduction

Internationally there is an increasing trend of including learners with disabilities and diverse learning needs in regular classrooms. Most of the countries in the West have either legislation or policies that support this inclusion (e.g. Australia, Canada and USA). A majority of students with disabilities (SWD) who attended special schools in the past are now attending regular schools, yet placement in regular schools does not always guarantee access to high quality education. Unless school teachers have positive attitudes towards inclusion (Sharma and Jacobs 2016), have knowledge and skills to include all learners (EADSNE 2012) and are well supported by their school leaders and the rest of the schooling community (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2004), it is not possible to successfully implement inclusive practices. Inclusion in this paper is defined as the task of identifying and addressing barriers to participation in education (Ainscow et al. 2011).

This paper examines how teachers in two different educational systems, i.e. Australia and Italy, are responding to the inclusion mandate. In Italy, the mandate to include SWD into mainstream schools existed long before many other countries were signing the Salamanca Statement in 1994 (UNESCO 1994). In fact, in 1971, the Law 118 paved the way to the abolishment of special schools, whereas Law 517 in 1977, besides guaranteeing education for all in mainstream classrooms, envisaged the introduction of a learning support teacher and an individualised educational plan for students with disability (Law 517 1977; Begeny and Martens 2007). Currently, more than 99% of SWD enrol in mainstream schools in Italy (EADSNE 2012). In Australia, largely a multi-cultural and multi-racial country, the move to include SWD in regular schools began with the passage of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1992 (Sharma 2014). It was the first time that parents were given the choice to enrol their child in special or regular schools and school authorities could not refuse to admit a child citing the reasons of a child having a disability. In 2005, the Educational Standards of the DDA were passed by the Australian Parliament (Sharma and Sokal 2015), which further clarified the roles and responsibilities of school authorities to provide quality education to SWDs. The study will compare in-service teachers' attitudes, concerns, efficacy and intentions to teach in inclusive classrooms from the two countries.

A number of researchers have undertaken multinational comparative studies to examine teachers' attitudes (Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin 2008; Saloviita and Schaffus 2016), efficacy (Savolainen et al. 2012; Malinen et al. 2013; Sharma and Sokal 2015) and concerns (Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin 2008; Malinen et al. 2013) to teach in inclusive classrooms. Such international comparisons are useful as they provide insight into factors that shape participants' attitudes and efficacy beliefs in different contexts. E.g. Saloviita and Schaffus (2016) examined teachers' opinions about inclusion in Finland and Germany. They also examined concerns of participants from both countries. They found that participants from Finland were more positive in their attitudes towards inclusion compared to their German counterparts. The researchers found that overall Finland participants were slightly less concerned about inclusion compared to their German counterparts. The German participants were mainly worried about the increase in their work load as a result of the inclusion of students with additional learning needs in their schools. The study was interesting in many ways, but most importantly, it highlighted a systemic issue that can influence participants' attitudes and concerns. The researchers concluded that the difference in participants' attitudes and concerns could be 'attributed to different structures of educational organisation' (458). In Finland, teachers generally receive more support which could address participants' concerns and may also reduce their overall level of concerns. The level of support that teachers receive to implement inclusive practices in Germany is insufficient which was reflected in the levels of concerns displayed by the German participants.

We do not have sufficient data yet to show if a country with a longer history of implementing inclusive education differs from another country that began implementing inclusive education more recently. Comparing Australian and Italian teachers' intentions to implement inclusive education may provide new insight about factors that shape their intentions. The findings of such comparative research may have implications for how we prepare and support in-service teachers to implement inclusive education.

## **Theoretical framework**

According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour TPB (Ajzen 1991), an individual's actual behaviour can best be predicted by the individual's intention to perform the behaviour. The intention of the individual in turn is influenced by the three inter-related variables of attitudes, subjective norm and the perceived competence. Ajzen conceptualised attitude as an individual's affective predisposition to either perform or not to perform the behaviour; subjective norm as how the society or significant individuals in the community evaluates the behaviour; and perceived competence as an individual's capacity to perform the behaviour. His theory has been applied successfully across a number of disciplines to predict participants' intentions and actual behaviours. Surprisingly the theory has been applied minimally in the field of inclusive education largely may be due to limited awareness of the theory amongst inclusion education researchers. In a previous study, Ahmmed, Sharma, and Deppeler (2013) examined intentions of 1387 in-service teachers to include SWD in regular schools in Bangladesh. They found that attitude, efficacy and perceived support were significant predictors of participants' intention scores. Use of the TPB theory in the field of inclusive education can provide better explanation about teachers' willingness and more accurately predict their behaviours in actual classrooms. In the current study, we made an attempt to apply the theory in understanding Australian and Italian teachers' intentions to teach in inclusive classrooms. Our key objective in this study was not to test the theory but to use the theory in better understanding teachers' intention to teach in inclusive classrooms. The three key constructs of the TPB, i.e. attitudes, subjective norm and perceived competence, were measured using teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, teachers' concerns about inclusion and their teaching efficacy to teach in inclusive classrooms, respectively.

## **Objectives of the study**

The unique contextual factors in Australia and Italy can influence teachers differently in the way they transform, adapt and enact educational policy reforms of inclusive education. The current study is undertaken to achieve the following objectives:

- To determine if significant differences existed between Australian and Italian teachers' attitudes, concerns and intention to teach in inclusive classrooms
- To determine what factors predict Australian and Italian teachers' intentions to teach in inclusive classrooms
- To compare concerns of Australian and Italian teachers about implementing inclusive education.

## **Method**

### **Data collection instruments**

Data were collected using a five-part survey questionnaire. Part 1 of the survey consisted of an eight item Attitudes towards Inclusion Scale (AIS) (Sharma and Jacobs 2016). Each item on the scale uses seven-point Likert type anchors ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). The total score on AIS can range from 8 to 56 with higher scores being indicative of positive attitudes towards inclusive education. The reliability coefficients for

the AIS were calculated for the current sample of teachers from Australia to Italy and they were found to be 0.81 and 0.71, respectively.

Part 2 consisted of the Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale (CIES) (Sharma and Desai 2002). The scale consists of 21 items that are clustered into four factors of 'resources', 'academic standards', 'acceptance' and 'work load'. Each item can be responded to, using a four-point Likert type response of Not At All Concerned (1), A Little Concerned (2), Very Concerned (3) and Extremely Concerned (4). A high score is indicative of a higher degree of concern. The scale is widely used and found to be valid across different international contexts. The reliability of the scale in the original study was found to be 0.91 (Sharma and Desai 2002). Reliability coefficients of the scale were also checked for the Australian ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) and Italian samples ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ) and they were found to be adequate.

Part 3 consisted of the Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices scale (Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin 2012). The scale comprised of 18 items that can be responded to using a 6-point Likert type ratings of Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (6). A higher value on the scale is indicative that the participant possesses a high sense of teaching efficacy to teach in inclusive classroom compared to another participant who obtains a lower score. The reliability of the original scale was 0.91 (Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin 2012). The alpha values of the scale for the current sample of the Australian and Italian samples were 0.91 and 0.94, respectively.

Part 4 of the survey consisted of the Intention to Teach in Inclusive Classroom Scale (ITICS) (Sharma and Jacobs 2016). It contains seven items. Each item of the scale is written in such a way that it can capture the participants' intention to teach in inclusive classrooms. An example of an item from the scale is phrased as follows, 'Change the curriculum to meet the learning needs of a student with learning difficulty enrolled in your class'. Participants can respond to the item using a seven-point Likert type rating of Extremely Unlikely (1) to Extremely Likely (7). ITICS also yield a total score, the value which can range from 7 to 49. A higher score on the scale is indicative of a higher level of intention to teach in inclusive classrooms. Alpha values for the reliability of the scale were calculated and found to be 0.82 for the Australian sample and 0.65 for the Italian sample. The alpha value for the Italian sample was slightly lower but adequate to allow for inter group comparisons (DeVellis 2003).

Part 5 of the survey gathered participants' background information.

## Participants

Participants for the study were 314 in-service teachers. An online request was sent to 613 school principals in Victoria to participate in the study. Only 12 schools agreed to participate in Victoria. The principals of consenting schools sent the online link to teachers to complete the survey. In Italy, the respondents involved were among 177 teachers attending a professional development course to acquire the Learning Support Teachers' Warrant. These were invited to complete the survey on the first day of the course. Out of the 314 teachers, 153 were recruited from Victoria, Australia and 156 were selected from Southern Italy. Sixty-four per cent ( $n = 95$ ) of the participants from Australia were male, whereas the vast majority (93% or  $n = 145$ ) of the participants in Italy were female. The majority of the participants in both countries (approximately 60%) were above the age of 36 years ( $n = 90$  in Australia and  $n = 94$  in Italy). Participants were asked to indicate their highest level of qualifications in both countries. A large majority of the Australian participants (67% or 100 of them) had completed

a Bachelor's degree. In Italy an overwhelming majority (72% or  $n = 113$ ) had completed an Educational Specialist Degree or a post-graduate Degree (Masters or PhD) in the subject taught. The number of participants with such a specialist degree in Australia was very small ( $n = 10$  or 6.3%). A large majority (96% or  $n = 142$ ) of participants in Australia were teaching in secondary classrooms (Grade 7 or above). In Italy, participants were more or less equally distributed across different grades ranging from preschool ( $n = 39$ ), Grade 1 to 6 ( $n = 30$ ), and higher grades ( $n = 76$ ).

## Results

### *Differences between Australian and Italian teachers*

Australian and Italian teachers' attitudes, concerns, teaching efficacy and intention scores were measured using reliable scales in two countries. Table 1 shows the results based on the mean scores for both samples. In almost all cases, Italian teachers were found to have significantly positive attitudes, lower levels of concerns and higher degrees of intentions to teach in inclusive classrooms compared to their Australian counterparts. However, when the two groups were compared for their efficacy scores, the Australian teachers were found to have a significantly higher levels of teaching efficacy beliefs. It is important to note that significantly positive attitudes in the Italian sample are not suggestive that Australian teachers hold negative attitudes. It only means that of the two groups, one group had statistically and significantly more positive attitudes when compared to the other group. The same also applies to their level of efficacy and intention beliefs. Both groups of participants obtained a concern score of slightly above 2. It is suggestive that while Australian teachers were significantly more concerned than Italian teachers, their level of concerns were not very high, as a mean score of 2 is rated as 'a little concerned' on the concern scale.

### *Predictors of intention to teach in inclusive classrooms*

The Theory of Planned Behaviour guided the conceptual model used in the current study to determine factors that could influence participants' intentions to teach in inclusive classrooms. Simple regression was used with 'intention to teach in inclusive classrooms' as the dependent variable and attitude, concern and teaching efficacy as predictor variables. Significant models emerged for both samples of Australian ( $F = 11.45, p < 0.001$ ) and Italian teachers ( $F = 27.91, p < 0.001$ ) (see Table 2). For both samples, attitudes and teaching efficacy scores were found to be the significant predictors of participants' intention scores.

**Table 1.** Comparative Mean scores of Australian and Italian teachers' attitudes, concerns, efficacy and intention scores.

| Variable   | Australia   | Italy       | Mean Difference | T test    |
|------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------|
|            | Mean (SD)   | Mean (SD)   |                 |           |
| Attitudes  | 5.29 (1.19) | 6.48 (0.57) | -1.187          | -11.16*** |
| Concerns   | 2.26 (0.58) | 2.04 (0.50) | 0.224           | 3.63***   |
| Efficacy   | 4.87 (0.67) | 4.61 (0.69) | 0.256           | 3.29***   |
| Intentions | 6.10 (0.77) | 6.48 (0.48) | -0.371          | -5.085*** |

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 2.** Summary of regression analysis for variables predicting Australian and Italian teachers' intentions to teach in inclusive classrooms.

| Variables             | Australia |             |         | Italy    |             |         |
|-----------------------|-----------|-------------|---------|----------|-------------|---------|
|                       | <i>B</i>  | SE <i>B</i> | $\beta$ | <i>B</i> | SE <i>B</i> | $\beta$ |
| Attitudes             | 0.16      | 0.05        | 0.26**  | 0.42     | 3.18        | 0.51*** |
| Concerns              | −.10      | 0.10        | −0.08   | −0.05    | 0.06        | −0.05   |
| Teaching efficacy     | 0.25      | 0.08        | 0.24**  | 0.14     | 0.04        | 0.20**  |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> |           | 0.19        |         |          | 0.36        |         |
| <i>F</i>              |           | 11.45***    |         |          | 27.91***    |         |

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

### Teachers' concerns about inclusive education

Australian and Italian teachers' mean concern scores were calculated for the four concern factors of resources, acceptance, academic standards and work load. The mean scores were compared using independent sample *t*-tests to determine if there were significant differences in their level of concerns. Significant differences were noted for two factors of academic standards and workload. Australian teachers were significantly more concerned about declining academic standards ( $M = 2.13$ ) compared to their Italian counterparts ( $M = 1.81$ ). The Australian teachers were also significantly more concerned about the increase in their workload ( $M = 2.09$ ) when compared to the Italian teachers ( $M = 1.51$ ).

### Discussion

The current study provided an insight into factors that shape teachers' intentions to teach in inclusive classrooms in Australia and Italy. The study examined in-service teachers' attitudes, concerns and efficacy beliefs to teach in inclusive classrooms and it also investigated how these three closely related constructs influenced teachers' intention to teach in inclusive classrooms.

Overall Italian teachers were more positive in their intention to teach in inclusive classrooms compared to Australian teachers. Regression analysis of intention scores revealed that attitudes and efficacy scores were significant predictors of participants' intentions to include SWDs from both countries. The findings are similar to a study conducted in Bangladesh where teachers' attitude and efficacy scores were also significant predictors of their intentions (Ahmmed, Sharma, and Deppeler 2013). The findings from the current study and Ahmmed, Sharma, and Deppeler (2013) may have significant implications in countries beyond Italy and Australia. The finding suggests that if we are keen for teachers to include learners with disabilities, we need to make sure that teachers have positive attitudes and a higher sense of teaching efficacy beliefs. Unfortunately, neither attitudes nor efficacy can be manipulated easily. Past research suggests teachers who are well supported in their efforts to include learners with disabilities (Ahmmed, Sharma, and Deppeler 2013) and who have received appropriate training tend to have a higher degree of commitment (Forlin and Chambers 2011) and tend to have a higher level of efficacy in including all learners (Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin 2008). One way to improve teachers' attitudes and efficacy beliefs could be to ensure that they are well supported by school leaders and the system. It may be helpful to design professional learning programmes that cover practical aspects of including learners with disabilities. It will also be useful to cover information about how best schools can work

with local community in mobilising resources to include all learners. The combined effect of such a professional learning programme is likely to have positive effect on teachers' attitudes and efficacy beliefs and eventually their classroom practices.

Significant differences were also noted in Australian and Italian teachers' attitudes. Italian teachers were significantly more committed to teach in inclusive classrooms compared to their counterparts in Australia. The finding could be partially explained based on the long history of the inclusion movement in the two countries. Italian teachers have been including SWDs for much longer than their counterparts in Australia. Also, there have been many legislative milestones in Italy (first such mandate was passed in 1971) that promoted inclusive education that have existed in the country for much longer compared to Australia (the DDA was passed in 1992). In Italy, subsequent legislation has made provisions for additional support to schools to include learners with disabilities (e.g. Learning Support Teachers). It is possible that such support may have positively influenced teachers' commitment to include SWDs. In Australia, while the DDA and subsequent passage of the Education Standards of the DDA in 2005 have identified the new roles and responsibilities that teachers need to perform to ensure SWDs are not discriminated against by the education sector; the Acts do not comment on what support would be made available to teachers to perform their new roles. An implication of the finding is that policy-makers and government agencies need to identify ways teachers can be supported in their attempts to include SWDs in their classrooms. It may even be better if such support is explicitly identified in laws and policies that support inclusion. Legislation and policies need to shift their focus away from just outlining what needs to be done, to identifying ways the key stakeholders could be supported in their attempts to implement the policy and legislative reforms of inclusive education.

Provision of any legislation on its own cannot fully explain the differences in the levels of commitment of teachers to include SWDs in their classrooms from the two countries. Socio-cultural practices in the two countries may also explain the differences in the level of commitments of teachers. In Italy, teachers still tend to see their classrooms from a communal perspective even though the student population is gradually becoming more multi-cultural and the tradition of joint families is less prevalent than before. In fact, such traditional values still prevail and may influence teachers' commitment to implement inclusive education. Research conducted since the 1970s on integrative and inclusive models have shown that, albeit a number of concerns, teachers hold very positive attitudes towards SWDs and the single-track inclusive system Italy has fully adopted (Agnelli 2010; Ianes, Demo, and Zambotti 2010; Vianello et al. 2015). In Australia, most classrooms (particularly in urban areas – where the current study was conducted) are quite varied in terms of diversity of students. Students from various religious, linguistic, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds could be seen attending the same classroom. It is possible that teachers find it difficult to address diversity which arises not just because of the disability of a student. In classrooms with significant variability in student population, teachers may find the task of inclusion a difficult logistical issue rather than the issue of *belonging*.

An examination of teachers' concerns from the two countries presented some interesting perspectives (Table 3). While teachers from both countries had similar levels of concern on two factors of 'resources' and 'acceptance', significant differences were noted in their scores on 'academic standards' and 'workload'. Italian teachers were significantly less concerned about the increase in their 'workload' and decline in 'academic standards'. Italian teachers have been including SWD in their classrooms for much longer compared to their Australian

**Table 3.** Comparisons of concerns about inclusive education of Italian and Australian teachers.

| Variable           | Australia   | Italy       | Mean difference | T test  |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|---------|
|                    | Mean (SD)   | Mean (SD)   |                 |         |
| Resources          | 2.65 (0.77) | 2.56 (0.70) | 0.896           | 1.06    |
| Acceptance         | 2.08 (0.52) | 2.09 (0.59) | -0.014          | -0.28   |
| Academic standards | 2.13 (0.68) | 1.81 (0.69) | 0.315           | 4.02*** |
| Workload           | 2.09 (0.72) | 1.51 (0.46) | 0.579           | 8.40*** |

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

counterparts. It is possible that their extensive length of experience in implementing inclusion has prepared them well to implement inclusion and it could have potentially reduced their levels of concerns. In Australia, a large number of SWD attend special schools. Some teachers still tend to see the inclusion of SWDs as additional responsibility on top of their routine activities and they believe that special schools could be the most appropriate placement for SWDs (Sharma and Sokal 2015). Significantly higher levels of concerns about declining academic standards of Australian teachers compared to their Italian counterparts are a reflection of the concerns that teachers have about an important systemic issue. Schools in Australia are benchmarked based on the educational performance of students. The academic achievement scores are used to prepare league tables that allow inter-school comparisons. The schools are required to report their school's academic performance on their website and this information is widely available to prospective parents and the community. Most SWD do not perform well in the state level or national level standardised tests and can negatively impact on a school's ranking. Some schools are reluctant to include SWDs. It is, therefore, not surprising that Australian teachers were concerned about declining academic standards. A clear implication of the finding requires making reforms at the system level. Schools need to be encouraged for including all learners and should not *just* be ranked on how well they perform academically but also on how well they are ranked in terms of including learners with disabilities. There is already some research emerging that excellence and equity can co-exist (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2004). Making such a drastic policy reform will not be easy by any means, but is likely to have significant impact in enhancing the commitment of schools to include all learners rather than continuing to see inclusion as an additional responsibility.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Disclosure statement

**Umesh Sharma** is the head of the Educational Psychology and Inclusive Education Academic Community in Faculty of Education at Monash University. His main areas of research interests are 'inclusive education in developing countries', 'inclusive teacher education' and 'attitude and efficacy measurement'.

**Paola Aiello** is the Director of the postgraduate teacher education course in Autism Spectrum Disorders and is the Delegate for internationalisation and for disability issues of the Department of Humanities, Philosophy and Education at the University of Salerno. Her research interests include 'teacher education for inclusive educational contexts', 'teacher agency' and 'inclusive education'.

**Erika Marie Pace** (PhD) is a research fellow in the Department of Humanities, Philosophy and Education of the University of Salerno. Her research interests focus on 'teacher education to promote the implementation of inclusive practices in educational contexts'.

**Penny Round**, PhD, is a lecturer in inclusive and special education, who has been working in the area of students with special needs for 30 years. Penny has qualifications in both special education and gifted education. Her primary research has revolved around students with special needs in regular secondary schools completing high school. His research interests include teacher education, supporting students with diverse needs and gifted education.

**Pearl Subban's** research interests are shaped by many years as a secondary school teacher and a school leader, over two continents. She has supported classroom teachers with accommodating diversity at both junior and senior secondary levels. Consequently, her research interests include differentiated instruction, attitudinal studies, catering for diverse learners, language and literacy teaching. She currently teaches into programs preparing both in-service and pre-service teachers for their roles as global educators.

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