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# From segregation to inclusion: special educators' experiences of change

Monique Somma

Department of Teacher Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, Canada

## ABSTRACT

This phenomenological case study explored the pedagogical change experiences of five special education teachers who have transitioned from teaching in a self-contained class to an inclusive class. Educators participated in individual interviews regarding their experiences over the course of their teaching careers. These data were combined using a descriptive phenomenological method, to create a single collective description that illustrated the change experience of a special education teacher. Overall findings indicated that despite their special education training, these educators were challenged by their own beliefs and expectations, the attitudes of others and systematic barriers. Participants also highlighted increased performance of students with exceptionalities in inclusive classes, the growth and development of the other students, and their overall pedagogical shift. These findings suggest implications for professional development as well as maximising the skills of trained teachers in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) and mentorship opportunities.

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Inclusion; teacher change; pedagogy; phenomenology; rights

## Introduction

School boards, administrators, and teachers recognise that creating truly inclusive schools, where all students regardless of physical or cognitive ability are educated on a full-time basis with their same age peers in their neighbourhood schools, requires schools to change traditional and common practices (Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin 2012). Many classroom teachers understand that implementing fully inclusive practices can have a profound impact on their role in the classroom. In order to address the diversity of abilities in the classroom, teachers must adjust teaching styles including how they programme for, plan, and execute curriculum (Reiser and Secretariat 2012). For educators to successfully meet the diverse needs of their students, educators require adequate knowledge, thorough training and skills, as well as favourable attitudes towards inclusive education (Berry 2011; Ivey and Reinke 2002; Male 2011). When school systems and administration provide teachers with opportunities to reflect on their practice and challenge their beliefs, the outcome can be changed in not only behaviour, but also, in the rationale that accompanies new inclusive practice (Evans 1997; Pyhältö, Pietarinen, and Soini 2012; Richardson 1998).

**CONTACT** Monique Somma  [msomma@brocku.ca](mailto:msomma@brocku.ca)  Department of Teacher Education, Brock University, 1812 Sir Isaac Brock Way, St. Catharines, Ontario L2N 3A1, Canada

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Generally speaking, educators require knowledge, training, and skills, combined with favourable attitudes towards inclusive education and self-confidence in teaching ability, in order to create successful inclusive classrooms (Berry 2011; Friend and Bursuck 2002; Ivey and Reinke 2002; Male 2011; Richardson 1998). A few studies have found that special education teachers, in particular, have more favourable attitudes about the abilities of students with exceptionalities and towards inclusion (Bean, Hamilton, Zigmond, and Morris 1994; Woolfson, Grant and Campbell 2007). However, these studies focus on special education teachers who are working as a resource support to classroom teachers, rather than teaching their own classrooms. Studies with special educators that focus specifically on their perceptions and experiences of inclusion are limited when teaching in a self-contained or an inclusive class. In a recent international study of special education teachers' and classroom teachers' beliefs about 'mainstreaming' (a term sometimes used to describe inclusion), Bekirogullari, Soy Turk, and Gulsen (2011) found that contradictions existed among the responses given by special education teachers. Regarding the inclusion of students with exceptionalities, special educators disagreed. While some special education teachers argued that students with exceptionalities should only be included during the subjects that promote play skills, others said they believed children with exceptionalities are capable of achieving by observing the behaviour of children without disabilities (Bekirogullari, Soy Turk, and Gulsen 2011). Overall, Bekirogullari, Soy Turk, and Gulsen (2011) found that among special educators from the United States and Cyprus, knowledge levels are low in the methods and content of inclusive education. Based on these limited findings and the notion that experiences are a factor in attitudinal change, special education teachers need opportunities to develop their own inclusive classrooms in order to compare their outcomes, attitudes, and beliefs with classroom teachers without special education experience.

Although special education teachers have training and expertise to work with students with exceptionalities, their opportunity for experiencing successful inclusive practice is limited based on their work in segregated classroom settings. Recognising that change of any sort is a process, this research investigated the process of change that has occurred in special educator attitudes and teaching practice.

A rights-based model of inclusion takes the position that each child regardless of ability has a right to participate fully in all aspects of the school including being in a classroom with their peers and extracurricular activities; UNCRPD 2007, Harpur 2012). Porter (2010), contends that school systems (and teachers within them) need to change in order to adopt this model of inclusion based on the human rights outlined by UNESCO in 1994. Opportunities to challenge beliefs regarding students with exceptionalities from a rights-based model of inclusion may provide educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in an authentic inclusion experience. Within a rights-based framework, school systems and teachers believe that a student with an exceptionality has the same rights as all other students to access programmes and activities to reach his/her potential. Based on the premise of rights-based inclusion, it is the responsibility of the school to ensure the student has the supports needed for school success (equipment, EA support, technology, etc.). It is also the responsibility of teachers to ensure the student has access to a programme derived from the curriculum that meets the cognitive needs of the student and matches what the other students in the class are doing appropriate to their age (whether for credit or not). Another important role of school for all

students, including students with exceptionalities are the opportunities for extracurricular and social activities. Thompson and Timmons (2017), describe how opportunities for both academic learning and social interest contribute not only to an overall inclusive school environment, but, overall positive outcomes for students with and without exceptionalities.

Research also suggests that to challenge and change beliefs, teachers need the opportunity to actively engage and experience success in using inclusive practices in their classroom; only then, will they experience a positive change in attitude and perception about inclusion (Evans 1997; Porter 2010; Porter and Towell 2017; Richardson 1998). When teachers have authentic experiences with students who have exceptionalities and engage in the process of reflective practice, their perceptions about inclusive practice can be altered positively. Authentic experience such as the opportunity to see and practice inclusion where students with exceptionalities experience success, enables an educator to discover the challenges and successes of having a student with exceptionalities in an inclusive classroom.

Considering the literature outlined, the current study aimed to describe the personal experience of former self-contained special education classroom teachers working through inclusive pedagogy with a focus on whether their challenges and successes have contributed to a shift in their beliefs and attitudes. By sharing the personal stories of former self-contained special education classroom teachers, this work gives a voice to the unique change experience of these educators. The following questions were explored: (a) What are the change experiences of teachers moving from teaching self-contained special education classes to inclusive classes?; (b) How has this change in classroom placement impacted their attitudes and perceptions about students with exceptionalities and inclusive practices?

## Materials and methods

The overall phenomenological case study was compiled based on qualitative data collected from the personal interviews, of five educators certified with Ontario general teaching credentials, as well as, additional special education qualifications. Participants were invited to share their story of an ongoing experience (the change from teaching segregated to teaching inclusive). Participants met two specific criteria. Firstly, they must have been a special education teacher in a self-contained class prior to the study and secondly, each participant must also have transitioned to teach in an inclusive classroom within the past five years. Of the five participants, all were female, with a range in years of overall experience from 10–20 years and self-contained class experience of three to 10 years. The self-contained classes consisted of behaviour, developmental disabilities, learning disabilities and physical and multiple exceptionalities. In Ontario, self-contained class sizes range from 5 to 12 depending on the exceptionality and are accompanied by at least one educational assistant or child and youth worker. At the time of the data collection, two were teaching in primary/junior divisions (K-6) and three were teaching in intermediate/senior divisions (7–12). In this school board, inclusive classrooms consisted of 20–30 students with at least one student identified as exceptional, who was transitioning from a self-contained class, as well as, one classroom teacher (who may or may not have special education qualifications). In some instances, these classrooms would have

the support of an Educational Assistant and/or a Special Education Teacher, but this was not a guarantee and depended on need allocation and funding. All participants were from one Ontario school board undergoing a shift in service delivery for students with exceptionalities from a self-contained special education model to an inclusive model.

Five in-depth personal interviews occurred between August and October 2015. Phenomenological questioning asked participants to 'describe' their experiences in self-contained and inclusive classes, their preparedness and training in relation to the transition and their perception of inclusion while teaching a self-contained class (SCC) and now in their current role. Following data analysis, the participants were contacted one final time to member check their description and further contribute or omit any information.

Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method was utilised to examine the lived experiences of the special education teachers who were interviewed, focusing on their perspectives without the use of deception. This method allowed the researcher to maintain the voice of the educators, while also maintaining their confidentiality. Phenomenological analysis, termed phenomenological reduction, according to Giorgi (2012), was used to develop each educator's description. The researcher first read the entire description of each participant. Then, the researcher rereads each description for similarities to group ideas together. Giorgi (2012) explains that creating 'meaning units' aids in the analysis and is based solely on the attitudes of the researcher. The third step involved the transformation of the 'meaning units' into expressions in relation to the phenomenon. Once the most direct and more sensitive expressions were reviewed, the description was written.

Due to the specific and in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon (teacher change), the boundaries that exist between this phenomenon and real-world contexts (attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and teacher training), and based on theoretical frameworks and multiple sources of evidence, the case study method was also utilised (Yin 2009).

## Results

As in phenomenological research, the researcher presented to the participant as someone who reports having also lived the phenomenon under investigation (Englander 2012). Moustakas (1994) attests that the self of the researcher is present throughout the entire research process including collection and analysis of the data. Although I attempted to use bracketing in order to separate my own ideas, preconceptions, and knowledge when collecting and reflecting on these lived experiences (Giorgi 2012), it is unrealistic to presume that my perceptions and experiences did not become a part of the analysis and discussion of the findings. It is understood, in phenomenological research, that the researcher's own interpretation of the phenomenon will influence the analysis of the data and the development of the descriptions (Giorgi 2012).

After reading the stories of the five interviewed educators several times, eliminating the redundant information and having a second researcher do the same, five main themes were identified, **support and training**, **attitudes and perceptions**, **inclusive practice**, **growth and change**, and **teaching practice** each of which will be discussed.

Within the theme of **support and training** educators discussed various opportunities or lack thereof for professional development as well as the types of support, including

physical support and technical support, while in various roles over their teaching careers. Throughout the interviews, their beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about teaching students with exceptionalities become quite defined. They also described the attitudes of others but in less detail. The theme, **attitudes and perceptions**, encompasses the attitudes and perceptions held by the educators as well as those attitudes and perceptions they experienced from others regarding the students with exceptionalities in their schools. As a main focus of this research is on the topic of inclusion of students with exceptionalities, examples of both successes and challenges are identified in the interviews; which lends itself to the theme **inclusive practice**.

The next theme centres around the process of change identified through various 'turning points' in the educators' careers. Although their 'turning points' are different experiences they maintain certain elements of **growth and change**. The educators discussed many examples of experiences in the classroom and discussed their strategies for programming and planning. These stories and examples fall under the final theme of **teaching practice**.

The following description captures the essence of the experience of these educators who have had a shift in their thinking as a result of a shift in their practice. Based on phenomenological description according to (Giorgi, 2009), the information gathered from the analysis is used to develop a single description which will represent the experience of the group. *Jamie* represents the five educators' collective voice and experience.

## **The description**

### **Support and training**

*Jamie* began her teaching career in a self-contained class and felt that although there was a lot of training for herself and adequate support from Educational Assistants and Child and Youth Workers, as a new teacher, there was still so much to figure out just as it would be for any new job and for this reason sometimes she did not know who or what supports were available outside the school itself. Looking back, *Jamie* recognises the training she had was very useful and beneficial for working with students in inclusive classes. The professional development was very specific to students with exceptionalities and moving into an inclusive class and there was not the opportunity for professional development in other subject areas which would have helped her when she left the SCC.

When *Jamie* transitioned to an inclusive class, she did not feel supported in the ways that some of her colleagues were being supported. She attributed this lack of support to her previous special education experience and training. *Jamie* was disappointed and felt that even though she had more experience than others teaching students with exceptionalities, this teaching looked very different in an inclusive class compared to a self-contained class. She longed for the opportunity to have someone to collaborate with on best practices and strategies for including students. *Jamie* felt like she had a lot to learn about including kids with exceptionalities while at the same time meeting the learning needs of all of the students in the class. Since she was not being directly provided with professional development and the opportunity to collaborate from her school or the school board, she sought out her own support and professional development through reading and finding other colleagues who have experience to collaborate with. Despite all of these factors around support, *Jamie* still felt that her experience as a self-contained class

teacher contributed greatly to her success in creating an inclusive class. She also felt that support, in the form of PD, mentorship, and collaboration, is necessary for teachers to create inclusive classrooms.

### *Attitudes and perceptions*

*Jamie* identified a shift in her thinking from when she started teaching to the present. Initially, her belief was that the self-contained class was the best placement for students with exceptionalities. In this environment, she could meet the students' needs and she knew that she could protect them from the mistreatment and the attitudes of others. *Jamie* described it as heartbreaking when she would see her students standing alone outside at recess or being avoided in the hallway. She was appalled by the way other teachers spoke about her students based on their characteristics rather than who they were as people. She truly cared about them and it was only in this self-contained class environment that she could protect them from these horrible things. She actually felt sorry for students whose parents would not let them be in self-contained classes.

Overtime, *Jamie* started to reconsider if the SCC was the best placement for her students. She began to realise that although she felt that the students were safe and protected, were learning and seemed happy, the SCC was not reflective of real life. She tried to access opportunities for her students to be integrated into other classes but this was not as easy as she thought. Other teachers were not very receptive to having her students in their class and even when they were, students were still often ostracised and isolated. She felt powerless and did not know how to empower her students. It was through these experiences that she began to consider what an ideal school placement for students with exceptionalities would be. *Jamie* questioned the dichotomy that existed between self-contained and mainstream classes and considered if the SCC could be a different experience for her students. She decided that leaving SCC was the only option and perhaps working in a classroom that was more inclusive would provide more opportunity to the students with exceptionalities she was currently teaching. When *Jamie* had opportunities to see with her own eyes how successful students could be in an inclusive classroom, she knew she had made the right decision. Seeing how inclusion was positively influencing all the students in the class and providing students with exceptionalities social capital and at a level they did not have access to when they were in SCCs. At the same time, she recognised that it took a lot of work and not all teachers were prepared to create inclusive classrooms due to lack of experience, opportunity, and support. She still questioned whether or not she was meeting the needs of her students with exceptionalities in the inclusive class, for example, through the teaching of life skills.

### *Inclusive practice*

For *Jamie*, inclusion was complicated. When she thinks about inclusion, it is not this or that, it is muddled with all sorts of things including attitude, experience, training, support, and opportunity. The idea of inclusion has shifted over time from when she first started teaching to now. In the beginning of her teaching career, when she was an SCC teacher, there was a lot of resistance by other teachers when it came to including students with exceptionalities from her SCC. She felt that others had low expectations of students from SCC being successful and high expectations of their (the students) failure. These attitudes made her question the benefit of inclusion at that time. *Jamie* witnessed

her students being bullied and ostracised by others and questioned if this inclusion was providing the hoped-for social outcomes. *Jamie* identified this internal struggle she faced about meeting student needs and the social stigma the students experienced. She wanted to protect and meet their needs but also wanted them to be accepted by others in the genuine way that she accepted them.

When she moved into an inclusive classroom teacher role, it was essential that students with exceptionalities were on the class roster and spent significant chunks of their day, if not all of their day, in the classroom. She quickly recognised the support that students with exceptionalities experience by their peers. She witnessed a lot of growth in the other students – they were developing understanding, and compassion and in turn became advocates for each other. Students with exceptionalities began to develop friendships, make connections, and become accepted as a part of the class. *Jamie* now recognised inclusion as requiring differentiating, re-inventing, adjusting, creating activities specific for the group of students currently in your class, risk-taking, presume competency, collaborate with other teachers, think outside the box, and trial and error. When she taught all of her students skills for co-operative learning where the teacher is a facilitator and there is a positive classroom environment, everyone in the class learned to be responsible for each other. ‘It was just business as usual for those students because they just understood that you just do that as a good class member, you just look out for each other’.

### *Growth and change*

Through *Jamie*’s experience, elements of change were evident. She identified her change process as taking years to play out. Experiences she had in the beginning of her career influenced decisions she made later on and continue to play out in her current teaching practice. *Jamie* identified thinking differently now about including students with exceptionalities, then when she was teaching SCC. This change in her perception influenced her teaching practice. She once believed in the strength of the SCC in order to provide specific programming for students and cared deeply about the work she was doing. At various points along the way, she questioned why students were not accepted by others and she became deeply frustrated and disturbed by this. *Jamie* quickly became aware of the challenges involved with including students and recognised a large factor was based on the attitudes and fears of other staff. She began questioning her teaching practice from when she was in the SCC – would she want her child in a class such as that which she was teaching? Why are these kids in these classes? Why do these classes exist?

*Jamie* came to realise that as a society we have encouraged exclusion thus making it socially acceptable to exclude people. She made a choice to leave SCC because her beliefs were no longer aligned with that model. Although, she was not completely sure she aligned with inclusion, she was somewhere in the middle, she was sure that there was something better for these students. Through experiences and inspiring conversations with others, *Jamie* began to see how inclusion could be successful for students with exceptionalities and the positive impact inclusion has on the whole classroom. She engaged in the personal professional development and found that this learning made her open to possibilities and aware of things that she was not previously aware of. Witnessing the results of positive inclusion was the most powerful change agent for *Jamie*.



### Teaching practice

*Jamie* identified that developing and implementing inclusive practice posed many challenges for educators, even those with special education training and experience. One main challenge was time to prepare materials. Trial and error was often employed for differentiating curriculum and past lessons were not readily used in order to meet the needs of all learners in the inclusive class. Although she felt confident in her ability to develop and implement programme goals, at the same time *Jamie* was concerned that she was not adequately meeting the learning needs of the students with exceptionalities in the same way she would have had she had them in a self-contained class. *Jamie* found that once she gave the students with exceptionalities some independence in class, she started to see them grow socially and other students in the class would step up and become involved in the learning process of the students with exceptionalities. Although *Jamie* was willing to try to meet all of the needs of the various learners and create an inclusive classroom, she was frustrated by the teaching practices of others who were not as willing to do the extra work. *Jamie* wanted to help her colleagues but did not know how to go about doing this. It challenged her to engage in conversations with her colleagues around best practices for including students. At the same time, she also recognised that her colleagues were not at the same place as she was regarding her inclusive pedagogy. *Jamie* attributed this to the experiences she had both in the SCC and the inclusive class settings. At this point in her career, she viewed herself as a change agent within her school and a recognised her good inclusive pedagogy was helping her colleagues to move forward with inclusion in their own classrooms.

Overall, *Jamie* described many challenges and celebrations related to including students with exceptionalities as she moved through her teaching career which will be examined more closely through the discussion.

### Discussion

Although each of the five educators has their own story, they share many common elements to their journeys. In examining the description as it answers the first research question ‘What are the change experiences of teachers moving from teaching self-contained special education classes to inclusive classes?’, we will first consider the supports in place for these educators at various points in their careers. Leyser, Zeiger, and Romi (2011) and Mukhopadhyay (2014) found that specific training for teachers was a prerequisite to effectively implement inclusion. The educators in this study identified receiving a lot of training while in the self-contained class role as well as adequate teaching assistant support. However, when they moved into inclusive classes, they found that although their previous special education training was very beneficial to include students with exceptionalities, they lacked the skills in other curriculum content areas because they had not had very much experience in this area. Similarly, in other studies, teachers without special education training felt unequipped to teach in inclusive classes based on their lack of training and experience (Kgothule and Hay 2013; Male 2011). In the current study, the teachers felt that assumptions were made because of their special education experience that inclusion would be easy for them and indicated that they received little support if any relating to their areas of need. This finding supports current literature which identifies that support and training are key components to successful inclusion (Berry 2011; Friend

and Bursuck 2009; Ivey and Reinke 2002; Male 2011; Richardson 1998). Because of their hands-on experience, the teachers in this study felt prepared for inclusion in a very different way than reported by mainstream teachers who received training to teach inclusive classes (Leyser, Zeiger, and Romi 2011). This is a consideration and implication for teacher training, where this SCC experience is described by the participants as being valuable in their ability to teach inclusive classes.

Consistent with findings that examined the attitudes, specifically of special education teachers toward inclusion, the educators in the current study felt, at one time, that the self-contained class was the best placement for students with exceptionalities; and, in this environment, they were able to meet the needs of their students and protect them from the mistreatment of others (Bekirogullari, Soy Turk, and Gulsen 2011; Cook, Semmel, and Gerber 1999). In the current study, as teachers spent time in the SCC they began to question their practice within the SCC as a result of various obstacles they encountered including the negative attitudes of others as well as their own beliefs about what is fair and just for their students. Through their personal questioning, they began to develop belief systems that are consistent with what Rioux and Valentine (2006) and Harpur (2012), described as a human rights approach, where the structure or system must change in order to meet the needs of the students with exceptionalities. The participants identified that something needed to change about how students with exceptionalities were being serviced in schools. In alignment with (Katsui and Kumpu-vuori, 2008), the teachers in the current study recognised that their current charity-based approaches were failing into empower their students with exceptionalities to make their own decisions and develop autonomy. They communicated that they felt, with a change in their role to an inclusive classroom teacher, they could adjust teaching practice to be more consistent with their developing human rights beliefs about teaching students with exceptionalities.

In considering the second research question: 'What has been the impact of this change in classroom placement on teachers' attitudes and perceptions about students with exceptionalities and inclusive practices?', the description sheds light on the change process involved in the transitions of the educators in this study. Their practice as well as their overall attitude and perceptions have been altered. They identified inclusion as something that is complicated in that there are many factors that contribute to its success. Similar to the findings of Forlin et al. (2009) and Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin (2012), attitudinal shift has occurred in the participants as a result of positive experiences in inclusive settings. While in the SCC role, the teachers in this study identified concerns about the well-being of the students if they were in an inclusive class. They were concerned that the needs of the students would not be met and felt that mainstream class teachers would not be able to meet all of their needs as well as they, themselves could in the self-contained class.

Once the teachers moved out of the self-contained class, they identified changes to their practice. Initially, they felt confident to develop parallel programmes for students with exceptionalities in their class, where students with exceptionalities worked on individual programmes based on their academic ability. However, they quickly understood that this was not the intention of inclusion and their students with exceptionalities were still segregated from their peers. By collaborating with others, researching teaching methods, and revamping previously used lessons, they began to develop lessons and

programmes that were inclusive. Important factors identified included, developing a classroom culture, including peers in the inclusion, differentiating lessons, and having high expectations of students.

In order to fully understand if a genuine pedagogical change has occurred for these educators, the final question in the interview asked whether or not they would go back into a self-contained class teacher role if given the opportunity. All the teachers interviewed said that they would not go back into a self-contained class setting. They identified that their practice of special education would look very different from what it looked like when they were teaching SCC, if they had known what they now know about inclusive education.

### *Implications for practice*

The findings support literature which identifies that appropriate training and professional development are essential for creating and sustaining inclusive classrooms (Bennett 2009; Porter 2014). However, these findings indicate that despite having special education training and experience, the teachers identified challenges. Even though the teaching of students with exceptionalities was not particularly difficult for them in inclusive classrooms, the greatest challenge remained – figuring out how to meet the learning needs of all the students in the class. Teachers indicated they lacked preparedness for the inclusive classroom and described a gap in their knowledge when it came to develop inclusive curriculum. For these reasons, assumptions cannot be made regarding the preparedness of any teachers for inclusive classes regardless of their previous teaching experience and training.

Considering previous research findings that engaging in training on exceptionalities contributes to an overall shift in attitudes toward inclusion, providing educators with opportunities to learn and collaborate in a constructive way can help to facilitate attitudinal change about creating inclusive classrooms (Leyser et al. 2011; Male 2011). The teachers in the current study identified that the opportunity to collaborate with other educators working to create inclusive classrooms would be beneficial. Several teachers recommended that having a Professional Learning Community (PLC), initiated by the school board as a form of professional development would be beneficial for themselves as well as for others. This PLC would serve to provide teachers with the opportunity to collaborate and share best practices and build capacity around inclusive classrooms, inclusive practices, and inclusive curriculum. By pairing former self-contained class teachers with regular class teachers teaching similar grades, teachers would have the opportunity to collaborate and share best practices for both students with and without exceptionalities.

The educators in this study identified a relationship they were able to develop with the students and families in their self-contained classes. They referred to a level of caring for the students that allowed them to recognise the abilities of the students in a deeper way than their colleagues at the time. These educators further indicated that they felt this understanding and appreciation of the abilities of students with exceptionalities helped them when they were teaching in inclusive classrooms, in that they held high expectations for their students with exceptionalities. Research indicates that teachers who hold more favourable attitudes towards students with exceptionalities are more enthusiastic about inclusion (Friend and Bursuck 2009; Kgothule and Hay 2013; Male 2011). It is evident in the results and discussion that these educators care about the students with

exceptionalities that they have taught. This notion warrants further examination of the role of care in special educator pedagogy related to students with exceptionalities in inclusive classrooms.

Teachers with special education training and experience in this study indicated that they felt that they had more confidence than their colleagues when it came to inclusion. This is important for programming and staff development in that these teachers, in particular, have had experiences as well as training and thus have higher expectations for students with exceptionalities. They described their opportunity to teach in a self-contained class as a 'privilege' with the learning and professional growth they attained from this experience. Despite the curriculum and support-related challenges and their personal apprehensions, they identified having a better understanding of the child's full capacity when developing inclusive academic programming. Since research indicates that one of the key ways to promote inclusive pedagogy is for educators to have authentic and positive experiences with inclusion (Evans 1997; Grierson and Gallagher 2009), this finding from the current study is important when staffing classrooms where students with exceptionalities are first included. If teachers have confidence and a well-developed understanding of important aspects of teaching students with exceptionalities, such as the teachers in this study, they may be better equipped to demonstrate successful inclusion. In order to maximise the success of inclusion and provide a model for other teachers to witness, educators with self-contained class experience are actually a unique asset for the sustainability of inclusion in schools.

Consistent with the findings of Thompson and Timmons (2017), the teachers noticed that there was a significant impact from the inclusive classroom on students without exceptionalities in their classes. When they witnessed the positive effects of including students with exceptionalities on the other students in the class, the work they were doing was affirmed and they could see the bigger picture. Developing a class culture that accepts and respects each member and supports their individual learning had powerful implications for these teachers and their classes. Students' perceptions of difference and belonging changed, they were responsible for each other, and inclusion became regular, normal practice in their classrooms and schools. Creating students to be inclusive citizens has powerful implications. Developing a generation of inclusive adults would reform the disability rights movement. Further research in this area, specifically to consider the impact that inclusion has on all students from their personal perspectives is needed to understand this phenomenon. Also, longitudinal data collected on future outcomes and attitudes for students with and without exceptionalities from inclusive classes would further support the plight for genuine fully inclusive school environments and communities.

## Conclusions

From a critical disability, right-based framework, the inclusion of students with exceptionalities is based on the foundation of changing school environments and attitudes which are exclusive in order to uphold the fundamental human rights of each child to fully access education within their neighbourhood school with their grade-appropriate peers (Burghardt 2011; UNCRPD 2007; Harpur 2012; Rioux and Valentine 2006). Despite the many challenges that exist systematically and attitudinally, it is through changing structures such as self-contained classrooms and teacher attitudes toward inclusion that this

education model will come to fruition. The current research examined a group of educators under-represented in the literature. The attitudes and beliefs about the inclusion of special education teachers working in self-contained classes have been readily addressed (Bekirogullari, Soyturk, and Gulsen 2011; Cook, Semmel, and Gerber 1999; MacFarlane and Woolfson 2013).

The educators in the current study, all identified, in their responses and discussions, moments where their thoughts about segregating students with exceptionalities shifted from that of a positive environment to questioning segregated philosophy and thinking that there must be a better alternative. As they answered specific questions about their teaching practice and personal beliefs and described various experiences over the course of their teaching careers, their change process became evident. They all identified a pivotal moment or series of moments where they recognised their own growth and change in relation to personal attitudes and perceptions and also how they interpreted the attitudes and perceptions of colleagues (Forlin et al. 2009; Sharma et al. 2012). The teachers discussed experiences with the inclusion of both positive and negative that influenced their pedagogy for students with exceptionalities. Support and training were identified as factors that contributed to their understanding on effectively programming for and teaching students with exceptionalities (Leyser, Zeiger, and Romi 2011; Male 2011). As well, the educators felt that assumptions were made about their ability to successfully create inclusive classrooms. Finally, as a result of their experiences with inclusion and their personal growth and change, the teaching practice of these educators shifted, sometimes quite drastically, in order to create inclusive classrooms.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

*Monique Somma* is an assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Brock University. She teaches and researches on topics related to inclusive education, rights of students with exceptionalities and mental health.

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