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Religious belief as a variable impacting a teacher's attitudes towards inclusive education: A systematic review

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Abstract

This systematic review derives from the introductory chapter of a PhD thesis, highlighting challenges associated with implementing Inclusive Education [IE] in Australian Christian Schools. It frames the relationship between a teacher's religious beliefs and attitudes towards IE in two groups of Evangelical Christian schools in New South Wales. The review provides an orientation for a study, introducing the need to explore religious belief as a variable that may impact a teacher's attitude towards IE. It outlines the need to explore how religious belief may influence a teacher's intention to include students with disabilities. A problem statement outlining challenges for implementing IE in Australian Christian schools is presented before exploring the pedagogical and theological context of inclusive beliefs in Australian Christian schools. The empirical study findings stemming from this review will be published in a future edition of the journal.

Research Orientation

The motivation for exploring approaches to Inclusive Education (IE) in Christian schools originated from personal experience teaching students with special needs. While the researcher has worked in various school settings, the approach to inclusion taken by particular educators in Christian schools seemed noteworthy, warranting further description and understanding. Prior research has suggested that Christian educators may embrace inclusive attitudes in response to their faith or religious beliefs

(Cookson & Smith, 2011; Lane et al., 2019; Luebke, 2013; Mercer, 2014). Additionally, Christian schools are sometimes perceived as more welcoming and inclusive because of their faith (Shields, 2011; Stymeist, 2008). However, many Christian disability theorists have asserted that some Christians may exclude individuals with disabilities because of ableist interpretations of Biblical texts (Clifton, 2018a; Eiesland, 1994; Gosbell, 2021; Jacober, 2017; Yong, 2007). For example, it has been asserted that some Christians perceive disability as a consequence of divine judgement or as a tragic condition necessitating supernatural intervention (Clifton, 2018b; Eiesland, 1994; Jacober, 2017). Others have raised concerns about problems with exclusion within the Australian non-government school sector, of which most institutions self-identify as Christian. Some critics have asserted that elitist values may influence particular schools in the non-government sector, where students with disabilities may be excluded to obtain higher academic results (Graham et al., 2016). This assertion has led some to question whether some religious schools have higher levels of social exclusion (Campbell, 2023; Graham et al., 2016; Maddox, 2014).

Purpose of the review

This systematic review aims to introduce literature demonstrating the importance of a Christian educators' beliefs as a variable that may impact IE. It aims to clarify how religious frameworks, specifically within the Christian context, may positively or negatively impact educators' attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities. This will include a synthesis of the literature on the

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importance of beliefs, attitudes and religiosity for Christian educators.

Research questions

The associated research stemming from this review aimed to understand what typified a Christian teacher's approach to IE and identify beliefs about inclusivity that may be informed by religiosity. It aimed to identify teachers' attitudes concerning IE in a religious context and evaluate religious beliefs' influence on attitudes towards inclusion. More specifically, the research posed the following questions:

1. What characteristics typify approaches to Inclusive Education in two Evangelical groups of schools in NSW?
2. How does religious belief influence a teacher's intention to include students with disabilities in two Evangelical groups of Schools in NSW?

Defining Christian school

It is important to note that while most schools in the non-government sector identify religiously as Christian, these organisations operate under diverse definitions of *Christian schools* (Hastie, 2012). Maddox (2014) asserted that while Christian schools include elite private and liberal Christian schools, the fastest-growing type of Christian schools were low-fee Protestant schools. While Christian schools share a range of theologies, many low-fee Protestant schools assert conservative belief systems and are often self-described as *Evangelical*, *Christ-centred*, or *Bible-based* (Hastie, 2012; Maddox, 2014). For this review, *Christian school* refers to Evangelical organisations based on conservative Christian beliefs and values within the independent sector. These Evangelical organisations often have a theological focus on biblical inerrancy, the Trinity and salvation (Yong, 2014). While the term Christian school can hold many other meanings, it is the most accessible word for such research in wider academic discussions. Therefore, the term *Christian school* will be used this way in this review.

Problem statement

The review has insufficient time to discuss the nuanced debate concerning how IE is defined in Australian schools. While a clear definition of inclusive education remains elusive, Australia was a signatory to The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which first described IE as meeting the needs of students with disabilities in local mainstream settings. In Australian legislation, The Disability Discrimination Act (1992) intended to ensure that children with disabilities in Australian schools had

a legal basis to be educated by each state in an inclusive setting. To enforce this philosophical stance, the Disability Standards for Education Act (2005) then emphasised that reasonable steps should be taken to include students with disability on the same basis as students without disability.

While inclusive legislation has dominated the rhetoric of Australian education, this has not necessarily resulted in inclusivity for all students, as many individuals and communities continue to report experiences of exclusion and inequality (Foreman, 2015). Smyth (2013) asserted that after the global financial crisis in 2008, Australian schools focused on lifting academic benchmarks, which systematically pushed out lower-achieving students and caused students at risk of disadvantage, such as those with disabilities, to “tune out and switch off” (p.119) at an alarming rate. Additionally, some have argued that instead of fostering inclusion, recent Australian policies have created an atmosphere where negative attitudes towards disability thrive, and competition with standardised benchmarks is highly valued. Some have argued that because of these structures, students with disabilities receive more disciplinary actions, such as suspension or exclusion, than non-disabled students (Armstrong & Spandagou, 2009).

A major concern for IE in Australian settings is an increase in separate and segregated educational settings, such as special needs schools or special needs classes (Anderson & Boyle, 2015; Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011; Poed, 2020). From 2000 to 2015, special needs schools increased by 13% (Anderson & Boyle, 2015). Despite the rise of special schools, the number of students with disabilities receiving no formal education also rose from 2% to 3% in 2015, as reported by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2017). The number of students with disabilities being homeschooled also appeared to increase in this period (Roy, 2016). Furthermore, some have highlighted that Indigenous and out-of-home care students are overrepresented in separate and segregated settings (Anderson & Boyle, 2019; Graham, 2012). For example, a study in Australian rural schools asserted that many schools exclude Indigenous students by diagnosing them with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder by default, forcing unnecessary enrolments into special needs schools (Graham, 2012).

It is also worth noting that several reviews have reported apparent failures in providing IE in Australia (Hall et al., 2020; Long, 2020; *Public Hearing 7*, 2021; URBIS, 2015). For example, one review (n=25,000) found that students with disabilities were twice as likely as their non-disabled peers not to complete Year 12 (Hall et al., 2020). Internationally,

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Australia was ranked as one of the lowest-achieving countries in the OECD regarding overall inclusivity in education (Cologon, 2013). Australia also had the fourth-highest educational gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students in the OECD (Anderson & Boyle, 2019). While these rankings report on all forms of exclusion, including socioeconomic status, disability and race, general findings about social disadvantage might help inform realities about students with disabilities.

Some have concluded that support and enthusiasm for full inclusion have plateaued in Australia (Anderson & Boyle, 2019; Slee & Allan, 2011). For example, some studies demonstrate that teachers generally believe IE creates additional classroom problems (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Forlin et al., 2011; Weiss et al., 2019). Other studies have suggested that inclusive policy has increased harmful stress for teachers by expecting them to reinvent classroom practices (Forlin, 2006; Weiss et al., 2019). Forlin (2006) explains that IE has made teachers more responsible for implementing adjustments for students with disabilities. As a result, teachers are increasingly becoming concerned about their competence, including their ability to differentiate curriculum and manage challenging behaviours, as opposed to direct intervention from qualified support staff (Forlin, 2006). With increased demands placed on educators, some have argued that practitioners are giving up, declaring that IE is unrealistic and unattainable (Allan, 2008; Boyle et al., 2020). While early research suggested that teachers held positive attitudes towards IE (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996), later studies suggest that globally, attitudes of teachers toward IE tend to be negative or neutral (Avramidis et al., 2019; De Boer et al., 2012; Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017; Takala & Sirkko, 2022).

Christian schools

Although there appears to be interest in improving teachers' attitudes towards IE, few studies have explored attitude formation in Australian religious schools. Some researchers have commented that Church-based schools have been slower to provide inclusive services as the number of students with disabilities in Independent Christian schools has not been proportionate to the public sector in the past (Mercer, 2014; Shields, 2011). Others have suggested that public education carries a heavy burden by educating a disproportionately high number of students with disabilities (Anderson & Boyle, 2015; Gonski et al., 2011; Kenway, 2013). For example, studies from the United States of America have found that some non-government schools do not support families with disabled

children (Elliot, 2015; Stymeister, 2008). Elliot (2015) explains that many Christian schools in the United States of America were developed to meet the needs of average to above-average students. As a result, some international studies have suggested that Christian schools may lack research-based interventions for students with special needs (Stymeister, 2008).

While less research has been conducted in Australian Christian schools, Poed et al. (2020) explained that mainstream classrooms were often unavailable in Australian Independent Christian schools for students with disabilities and that some parents could only find inclusive settings in the public sector. For example, a random population survey (n=745) found that 28% of parents with children with disabilities reported that their enrolment in an Australian Christian school had been refused (Poed et al., 2020). However, others have asserted that IE is more than a philosophical approach for some educators as it is also considered a moral or spiritual mandate (Kanpol, 1999). For example, some studies have found that a Biblical ethos established by Christian schools promoted loving relationships, service to the community and acceptance of those at risk of exclusion (Cookson & Smith, 2011; Mercer, 2014).

The importance of beliefs and attitudes
It has been argued that for IE to be effective, educators must be committed to and supportive of inclusive philosophy (Mitchell, 2015). Because of this, research in IE frequently asserts that a teacher's attitude towards inclusion is the most important factor for the successful implementation of inclusive pedagogies (Costello & Boyle, 2013; Foreman, 2015; Hoskin et al., 2015; Kraska & Boyle, 2014; Pearce, 2009). As a result, many studies have sought to understand variables that might influence a teacher's attitude toward IE, such as their gender, age, training, experience or teaching specialty (Aiello & Sharma, 2018; Avramidis et al., 2019; Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017; Hoskin et al., 2015; Kraska & Boyle, 2014; O'Hara, 2018; Vaz et al., 2015). In addition, an increasing range of studies has acknowledged that a variety of social realities may shape a teacher's attitudes towards IE, including philosophical (McMenamin, 2018), sociological (Slee, 2013) and psychological (Berlach & Chambers, 2011) realities. For example, Berlach and Chambers (2011) assert that positive attitudes towards inclusive practice derive from particular psychological mindsets or worldviews. Alternatively, Slee (2013) posits that exclusive attitudes survive in Australia due to social or cultural dispositions. While many studies have explored a range of variables that may influence

attitudes, few have sought to understand how religious belief may influence a teacher's attitude towards IE. It is therefore proposed that investigating teachers' religious beliefs in Christian schools will increase an understanding of IE in Australia.

Defining *belief*

An inclusive philosophy asserts that IE is a belief system (Dingle et al., 2004) and that inclusive policy derives, at least to some extent, from particular beliefs and values (McMenamin, 2018). Essentially, many goals and mandates that emerge from inclusive legislation are ethically and morally driven by beliefs.

Ajzen (2011) argued that beliefs reflect subjective information individuals gather concerning objects, such as inclusive practices. In the context of religious belief, Bandura (2003) argued that believers interpret secular experiences in terms of their religious thoughts and essentially live out their religion through life. Some see religious belief as a hard-wired phenomenon stemming from the brain's attempt to spot and interpret patterns (Grayling, 2011). In this way of thinking, religious belief is seen as a cognitive process concerning what an individual considers true. However, some psychologists consider *belief* to also depict an emotional or automatic function where a believer trusts something to be true. For example, Schwitzgebel (2010) describes beliefs as mental acceptance or conviction. Pettit (1998) also argued that beliefs should be considered an individual's trusting inclination toward a truth claim.

A helpful construct to understand cognitive and affective aspects of belief is the '*belief that / belief in*' framework suggested by Machuga (2011). Essentially, while a teacher may see IE as a human right that should be implemented [*belief that*], it is assumed that this is not the same as trusting IE as a personal approach that benefits all learners [*belief in*] (Machuga, 2011). While belief has been identified as an important psychological construct, religious belief and its link to IE have received little formal investigation. The review argues that a study on the impact of religious beliefs needs to identify how specific religious beliefs may interact with inclusive attitudes.

Historically, there has been contention concerning whether religious belief constitutes a valid way of knowing that influences attitudes, in this case, about inclusivity. For example, Marx and Freud felt that Christian belief was not reality-orientated. This tendency is sometimes described as the *dejure* objection that religious belief is irrational, unjustified, or immoral (Plantinga, 2015). The *dejure* objection raises the question of how a researcher should treat

religious belief in a research setting.

It is important to note that Christian theology asserts Biblical inerrancy guiding how believers should live. Shields (2019) explains that it is almost universally understood that Christian education means adhering to the teachings recorded in the Bible. For example, Morton (2015) found that Biblical theology was an indispensable foundation for spiritual intimacy with God in Christian organisations. For Christian educators, to live ethically means aligning their lives with biblical beliefs and attitudes. Habermas (2008) also explains that for Christians, the Bible grounds believers in moral commands that must be obeyed unconditionally. This study proposed that Yong's (2007) concept of Pneumatological Imagination (PI) is a useful framework for evaluating religious beliefs.

Defining *attitude*

While the definition of *attitude* has varied in education over time, it generally refers to an evaluation a person may have for another concept or thing. Attitudes are conceptualised as relatively stable constructs comprising cognitive, affective and behavioural components (Vaz et al., 2015). An early definition of attitude was offered by Allport (1935), who saw attitude as a mental and neural state of readiness. More recent definitions see attitude as a *psychological tendency* expressed while 'evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour' (Ajzen, 1993). Attitudes are thought to colour perception, guide attention, and direct information processing (Glock & Kovacs, 2013). Specifically, Ajzen (1991) argued that attitudes can be linked to the performance of specific behaviours. While beliefs concern cognition and a trusting disposition, attitudes are an intention to act.

Ajzen (1991) argued that attitudes develop from 'the beliefs people hold' and that behaviour is a function of these beliefs. Additionally, Schwarz (2007) argued that attitudes are evaluations formed when needed instead of a trusting tendency based on affection and cognition. Significantly, although people hold various beliefs, they can only act on a small number of beliefs at any given time (Ajzen, 1991). The beliefs being acted upon are known as *salient beliefs*, which are thought to be the immediate determinants of a person's attitude at any given time.

The role of religious beliefs in Christian schools While it is beyond the scope of this review to explore all the realities that interact with inclusive ideologies, this review introduces religious belief as a reality that may play an essential role in the construction of inclusive attitudes. It is necessary to

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recognise that religious belief is a complex variable that remains inconsistent across religious affiliations and varies between believers. Some prior studies have attempted to compare how attitudes toward inclusivity differ by religious denomination, religious affiliation or church attendance (Duriez & Hutsebaut, 2000; Idris et al., 2016; Lifschitz & Glaubman, 2002; Scior et al., 2013). While these studies may give some interesting insight into religious trends, this approach is disassociated from how believers perceive God as a real entity who communicates and acts at an individual level in a teacher's life (Poplin, 2017). Studies focusing on religious affiliation also fail to describe complex metanarratives within each religious tradition and how these narratives shape understandings of inclusivity. As such, a study covering the relationship between religious belief and IE should evaluate the nature of religious belief as it pertains to inclusivity. Therefore, this research is multidisciplinary as it describes theological concepts of inclusivity and evaluates how these concepts are outworked in two groups of Evangelical schools in NSW. In this context, the study will explore educators' individual beliefs and attitudes rather than generating descriptors of religious beliefs and attitudinal formation by religious denomination.

It has been argued that for many educators in Christian schools, teaching is more than a career choice; it is also a vocation or an assignment from God (Magahara, 2009). This article proposes that the practice of teachers with Christian purposes may be uniquely shaped by their faith in doctrines such as the belief that students with disabilities are made in *the image of God* or, conversely, the belief that disability is caused by *sin* (Clifton, 2018a; Eiesland, 1994; Price et al., 2020). Based on the available research, it is assumed that particular theological attitudes toward inclusivity may influence teachers' practice. While most studies into teacher attitudes explore teacher-related variables such as age, gender, or training, religious beliefs concerning IE are complex constructs that require further exploration. This evaluation needs to draw on the educational and theological understandings of inclusivity.

Theory of planned behaviour

An appropriate way to explore how Christian educators' beliefs impact attitudes is through the Theory of Planned Behaviour [TPB] (Ajzen, 1991, 1993, 2011). The TPB argues that a teacher's attitude is primarily influenced by an individual's intention to conduct a particular behaviour. As such, to evaluate the relationship between religious beliefs and inclusive attitudes, it is argued that researchers should adopt a model that measures a teacher's

intention toward acting inclusively. The TPB argues that behavioural attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control are three constructs that impact a teacher's intention to include. In cognitivist theory, it is generally assumed that few educators will make it their goal to demonstrate moral turpitude in their practice. Instead, teachers will likely assume that their best efforts constitute best practice while forming moral justification for any exclusion. These are considered behavioural attitudes within the TPB. Importantly, cognitivist paradigms acknowledge that teachers can face problems or be prevented from acting on their intentions to perform positive behaviours (Ajzen, 2020). To appropriate the philosophical assertion of neurobiologist Ross Greene (2018), teachers do IE well when they can, not when they want to. Therefore, a teacher's ability to act inclusively could be perceived as behavioural control. Finally, the TPB argues that when behaviours such as inclusive practice are performed, the difficulties, consequences, and reactions of others may change or alter a teacher's beliefs.

TPB also recognises that various background factors, such as religious beliefs, influence behaviour indirectly (Ajzen, 2011). According to the TPB, various beliefs provide the cognitive foundation for attitudes. Ajzen (2011) asserted: "No matter how people arrive at their behavioural, normative and control beliefs, their attitudes towards the behaviour, their subjective norms and their perceptions of behavioural control follow automatically and consistently from their beliefs" (p. 1116).

However, the TPB makes no assumptions about how beliefs are formed or about the objectivity or validity of those beliefs. Thus, this review also needs an additional ontology describing belief formation for Christian educators.

Pneumatological Imagination [PI]

As introduced by Yong (2007), PI is an ontological framework used in theological discourses that describes how an individual's religiosity impacts thinking about self and the world. The term *pneumatological* derives from the Greek term *pneuma*, which is used in the New Testament to describe the affective dimension, rationality, the *spirit* and the power of perceiving divine things (Yong, 2007). Imagination refers to a contemplative mental state where believers consider how to respond to complex situations morally. Thus, a pneumatological imagination describes the process of religious thought on contemporary issues, considering how Christian beliefs should be applied practically. PI assumes that religious beliefs cannot be understood at face value but are negotiated cognitively within

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social structures. Essentially, while it is likely that some Evangelical Christian educators assume literal meanings and truth claims in Biblical texts, spiritual imagination is dynamic, having multiple and varying applications (Yong, 2017). This approach also assumes that there is a need to move from “mere head knowledge of what is right” toward a “heart conviction of what should be done” (Pudlas, 2007). Essentially, knowing about something and being committed to acting on it are considered two separate things. The ensuing research, to be included in a future issue of *Teach*, analyses inclusive religious beliefs as pneumatological imaginations developed from social, affective, and cognitive deliberation. The associated research adopts PI to describe how a Christian teacher uses dialogue and relationship with a deity in navigating contemporary issues.

Significance of the review

While many studies have discussed the importance of teachers' attitudes in implementing IE, few have explored how religious beliefs may interact with a teacher's intention to include students with disabilities. This review is significant as it introduces a previously underexplored variable that may impact a teacher's level of inclusivity towards students with disabilities. Furthermore, it introduces pneumatological imagination [PI] as an innovative way of evaluating the valence of religious beliefs in the context of IE. It is proposed that PI provides a framework to identify religious discourses consistent with inclusive philosophy within the more established Theory of Planned Behaviour. The results of the study that builds from this systematic review will be published in a later edition of the journal. **TEACH**

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