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Teachers' Self Efficacy and Attitudes towards Inclusive Education: Literature Review on Their Relationship

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Abstract

In recent decades, the idea of inclusive education is constantly gaining ground as an effort to co-exist children with disabilities and special educational needs - regardless of gender, ethnic origin and economic background - in the same educational space (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020). Inclusion is in line with the children's right access, presence, participation and achievement at their neighborhood school (Qvortrup&Qvortrup, 2018: 803–817; Slee, 2018:8). Despite the prevailing educational trend towards achieving inclusive schools, it is important to define some obstacles such as the ambiguity around the concept of inclusion and the challenges of educational systems to harmonize with international imperatives (Bruggink, Goei, &Koot, 2016; de Bruin, 2019).At this point it is important to underline two key factors that influence the implementation of inclusive practices in schools such as teachers' attitudes towards inclusion (Sharma, Sokal, Wang, &Loreman, 2021) and teachers' sense of self-efficacy (Opoku, Cuskelly, Pedersen &Rayner, 2020; Wilson, Marks Woolfson, & Durkin, 2020). Undoubtedly, teachers' positive attitudes (Moberg, Muta, Korenaga&Kuorelahti, 2020; Schwab, 2018) as well as their high sense of self-efficacy (Schwab, 2020) are critical elements for the effective implementation of inclusive educational systems.Despite the number of research that has been conducted regarding the relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and attitudes in inclusive education, it is impossible to draw a single conclusion. The aim of this literature review is to gather the recent research data regarding the relationship between these two concepts.

Keywords: inclusive education, teachers, self -efficacy, attitudes, special educational needs

Definitions of concepts

Teachers' self efficacy

Teachers' self-efficacy can be defined as their personal belief in their abilities to bring about desired student outcomes and in their competence in planning the curriculum, implementing strategies and meeting specific goals for the progress of students (Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011). According to Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory, people's actions are determined by three interrelated variables: personal factors such as sense of self-efficacy, individual behavior such as inclusive practices, and environment such as classroom(Bandura, 2011: 9-44). In addition, self-efficacy is formed from four main sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences (through observing someone else's teaching), social persuasion (through feedback the teacher receives regarding his ability to perform a task) and somatic and emotional states (such as the anxiety or joy one feels in relation to one's ability to complete a task) (Tschannen-Moran &Woolfolk Hoy, 2007). In a similar way teacher self-efficacy shapes to some extent the behavior and teaching practices he applies in the classroom, as will be discussed below.

As regards teachers' self efficacy, this concept is multidimensional and relates to instruction, classroom management, motivating and engaging students (Klassen et al., 2011).

Moreover, teachers' self-efficacy in inclusive practices is a construct that combines both domain specificity and generalizability (Yada et al., 2022). In other words, although teachers' self-efficacy in inclusive practices might be considered a domain-specific construct (Sharma, Loreman & Forlin, 2012), where teachers may feel efficacious about teaching certain subjects to certain students in certain settings, on the other hand inclusive practices could be applied in every kind of school setting despite the school levels and subjects that are taught (Yada, 2020).

In the field of inclusion, the relationship between personal cognition (self-efficacy) and outcome expectations (teachers' educational practice) determines the success of inclusive teaching (Özokcu, 2017). Also, teacher's self-efficacy has proved to predict teacher receptivity to innovative strategies and relate to student's motivation and success (Hsiao, Chen, Chang & Tu, 2011). These beliefs has an important role in directing teachers' actual behavior, means that teachers who feel greater self efficacy provide high-quality inclusive education (Wilson, Woolfson, Durkin & Elliott, 2016). This means ability to collaborate effectively, to use differentiated teaching (Weiss, Lerche, Muckenthaler, Heimlich, & Kiel, 2019) and inclusive teaching methods by pre-planning, designing, and providing equitable learning opportunities for all students (Capp, 2020: 706–720; Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020), to behave in positive way in the classroom (Sharma & George, 2016), use classroom management strategies and succeed to create a supportive class climate (Burić & Kim, 2020; Kristiana & Hendriani, 2018).

Instead, teachers with a low sense of self-efficacy avoid teaching in classes with special needs students (Yada et al., 2022), they appear reluctant to engage with them (Specht et al, 2016; Frumos, 2018) and as a result prevent them from achieving positive results (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2018). In addition, they provide inadequate inclusive practices because of their lack of knowledge and skills to practice inclusive education, poor administrative support, and lack of school resources (Zegeye, Alem & Abie, 2023; Metsala & Harkins, 2020).

At this point we can point out that teachers' sense of self-efficacy efficacy for inclusive practices has been associated with their attitudes toward inclusive education (Song, Sharma & Choi, 2019; Savolainen, Malinen & Schwab, 2022). In fact, teachers with higher self-efficacy are in favor of the study of students with some kind of special educational needs with their peers in general schools (Zee & Koomen, 2016) while teachers with lower self-efficacy tend to have negative and often hostile behavior towards them (Özokcu, 2017).

Given the importance of self-efficacy, it is considered important to refer to some variables that - as research has shown - influence the formation of teachers' sense of self-efficacy. First of all, supportive school climate is of utmost importance for teachers to feel that they can take over an inclusive classroom and deal with any challenging student behaviors (Hosford & O'Sullivan, 2016:606). Besides, cooperation between teachers is still a key factor for the effective implementation of inclusion, since teachers who do not feel confident to cooperate tend to have negative attitudes (Montgomery & Mirenda, 2014). Moreover, teacher training in special education (Wray, Sharma & Subban, 2022; Zegeye, 2022) and experience in implementing inclusive education is linked to teachers' self-efficacy (Matić, Škrbić, Kerkez & Veselinović, 2022). In addition, contact with people with disabilities has been shown to increase teachers' self-efficacy levels to teach in inclusive settings (Devi & Ganguly, 2022; Yakut, 2021).

Furthermore, research that has been conducted regarding the effect of gender on self-efficacy levels, results in contradictory results since some of them conclude that women are superior in terms of self-efficacy beliefs (Specht & Metsala, 2018: 67-82), while in other investigations male teachers had higher beliefs about their abilities (Reyhan & Babanoğlu, 2016; Zegeye, Alem & Abie, 2023). In any case, the correlation of teachers' sense of self-efficacy with demographic variables is not a safe option (Mitchell, 2019) while it is suggested to investigate the individual differences of teachers and individually in a specific context (Zee, Koomen, Jellesma, Geerlings, de Jong, 2016).

Attitudes

Attitude can be defined as a person's tendency, belief and feeling to respond in positive or negative way towards people or situations or objects (Hogg & Vaughan, 2014). The triadic composition of attitudes is therefore evident: knowledge/beliefs, emotions and a predisposition to act in a specific way (Alkhateeb, Hadidi & Alkhateeb 2016).

Based on the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen&Fishbein, 1980), which provides an understanding of an individual's attitude and behavior, Ajzen (2012) formulated his theory of planned behavior, where attitudes, subjective social norms (a person's perception of what others think of them), and perceived behavioral control (a person's perception of the ease or difficulty of performing a behavior, which is regarded as similar to Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy) intricately intertwined and determine actual behavior.

Thus the connection between attitudes and behavior -based on the aforementioned theory- also applies in the case of the inclusive education of children with special educational needs, since teachers who believe they have skills and support to engage in inclusive practice are likely to have confidence in their ability and intention to engage in it (Ahsan, 2015:1-11). Teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education include their beliefs and feelings about coteaching children with diverse educational needs in mainstream classrooms (Forlin, Earle, Loreman& Sharma, 2011). These are the main predictor of teachers' self-efficacy (Pit-ten Cate &Glock, 2018; Schwab, 2018) which in turn predict teachers' use of inclusive practices (Schwab &Alnahdi, 2020; Hellmich, Löper&Görel 2019) and consist one of the key factors of building successive inclusive education(Avramidis&Toulia, 2020; Moberg et al., 2020).

In general, research findings indicate that teachers are generally positive towards inclusion in theoretical level (Bhatnagar& Das 2014; Chhabra, Bose &Chadha, 2018). Of course other researches come to opposite results with teachers being more cautious towards inclusion (Kofidou&Mantzikos, 2017; Krischler& Pit-ten Cate, 2019).

Various factors have been identified from time to time that influence the formation of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Research by Sharma &Sokal (2016) showed that inclusion training helped Canadian teachers felt more efficacious for inclusive teaching concurrently and held more positive attitudes toward inclusion. Moreover, meta-analysis by van Steen and Wilson (2020) found positive teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and the effect of demographics and cultural factors such as year of publication, type of teacher, gender, cultural differences, and measures of teacher attitudes. Other factors such as the years of teaching experience of the teachers (Shah, Das, Desai &Tiwari, 2016), the nature of the special educational needs of the students attending each class (Yada&Savolainen, 2017; Fyssa, Vlachou&Avramidis, 2014) as well as their age (Galaterou& Antoniou, 2017; Pappas, Papoutsi&Drigas, 2018) seem to affect their attitudes in a positive way.

Research on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion has been conducted at the level of potential and active teachers. In general, prospective teachers have been found to have positive attitudes towards inclusion (Kraska& Boyle, 2014), which are influenced by the type of disability students have and their level of education (Sharma &Nuttal, 2016; Thaver& Lim, 2014).On the other hand, the literature shows the often negative or neutral attitudes of practicing teachers (Galovic, Brojcin, &Glumbic, 2014), which are influenced by factors such as experience, school support and years of teaching experience (Ahmmed, 2013).

Relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and attitudes in inclusive education

Research focused on the relationship between attitudes and sense of self-efficacy towards inclusion was grounded in the self-efficacy theory of Bandura (1977) and theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 2012). On the one hand, according to Bandura's theory, self-beliefs of efficacy affect human functioning including cognitive, motivational, selection, and affective processes such as attitudes and on the other hand -based on the theory of planned behavior- attitudes and efficacy are possible predictors of teachers' intention to participate in inclusive practices (Ahsan, 2015). In other words, each individual's intention to perform a behavioral act depends on their attitudes, their perceived / normative beliefs -based on the opinions of others to perform an action or not (subjective norm)- and by the individual's personal perception of whether the success of a particular behavior depends on him (perceived behavioral control), similar to Bandura's perceived self-efficacy (Ajzen, 2005).

The relationship between attitudes and self-efficacy has been thoroughly studied. Some of the main relevant research findings will be presented below. Particularly some researchers (Avramidis et al, 2019;San Martin, Ramirez, Calvo, Munoz-Martinez & Sharma, 2021; Yada et al, 2022;Hellmich et al, 2019; Löper&Görel, 2019; Woodcock, Sharma, Subban& Hitches, 2022;Miesera, DeVries, Jungjohann&Gebhardt, 2018; Weber & Greiner, 2019; Alnahdi& Schwab, 2021) showed a high correlation between the two concepts on the grounds that those teachers who feel more confident to engage in inclusive practice behave accordingly (Sharma & Jacobs, 2016), influencing the educational experiences of children in inclusive classrooms (van Steen & Wilson, 2020).

In addition, research by Urton, Wilbert & Hennemann (2014) και Toy & Duru (2016) showed that teachers' high sense of self-efficacy has a positive effect on teachers' views on social inclusion of people with disabilities, since those teachers who feel that they can accommodate students with disabilities/special educational needs in their classroom, are willing to work with other professionals and maintain positive attitudes towards inclusion. Furthermore, other studies support the link between teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education and/or their self-efficacy beliefs with their use of inclusive teaching practices (De Neve, Devos & Tuytens, 2015; Knauder & Koschmieder, 2019). For instance, in research by Avramidis, Toulia, Tsihouridis, Strogilos (2019) found that teachers' attitudes and sense of self-efficacy for inclusive practices predict their desire to implement a peer tutoring program in their classrooms. Similarly, Man Li & Cheung (2021) confirmed the association of positively situated teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy in implementing inclusive practices and managing student behaviors.

In fact, research data correlates high self-efficacy of teachers with positive attitudes towards inclusion in different samples such as teachers from different countries (Sharma, 2018; Yada, Tolvanen & Savolainen, 2018), of different levels (Lee, Tracey, Barker, Fan; Malak, Sharma & Deppeler, 2014), but also of teachers with different qualifications (Kormos & Nijakowska, 2017). For example, Sharma & Jacobs (2016) showed the positive correlation between efficacy for inclusive teaching and positive attitudes toward inclusion in Indian and Australian samples of in-service teachers. In a study by Shaukat, Sharma and Furlonger (2013) it was found that teachers from Pakistan have a higher sense of self-efficacy than Australians, a difference that is probably due to the different cultural context. On the other hand, in researches that have been done such as by Teo & Kam (2014) the self-efficacy scales did not seem to differ in terms of their measurements in each country that was conducted. Similarly, in a study by Yada et al (2022) it appeared that the relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and their attitudes is quite universal, regardless of publication (i.e., publication type and year) and sample characteristics (i.e., cultural differences, grade level taught or gender).

Of course, it is necessary to mention some researches that did not confirm the positive relationship between the two variables. In particular, in a study by Sharma, Loreman & Forlin (2012) a negative correlation was found between the attitudes of potential teachers and their self-efficacy beliefs, with teachers with more positive attitudes having low levels of educational self-efficacy to teach students with disabilities and vice versa. Moreover, other researchers showed the weak relationship between self efficacy and attitudes (Carew, Deluca, Groce & Kett (2018) and presented them as two divergent concepts (Saloviita, 2015).

Although both concepts are predictors of how teachers engage in using inclusive strategies (Wilson et al., 2016), Sharma, Sokal, Wang & Loreman (2021) found that beliefs of self efficacy are more potent predictors of intentions for inclusive classroom practice than are attitudes. This can be explained because teachers' efficacy include "the hands and the heart of inclusive educators" (Sharma, 2018) and is superior to simply implementing inclusive practices. Regarding the relationship between the two variables, recent research by Savolainen, Malinen & Schwab (2020) tested the causal direction between attitudes and efficacy with a cross-lagged longitudinal design and suggested that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs affect their attitudes toward inclusion rather than vice-versa.

Another aspect that lacks extensive research concerns the question of concepts' stability or not. Bosse et al. (2016) in their research correlated attitudes and self efficacy, that were highly stable over the period despite the absence of the examination of the causal relationship of the two constructions. The stability of attitudes and their resistance to change were also found by other researchers (Henke, Jäntschi, et al., 2016; Wilkins & Nietfeld, 2004), while self-efficacy beliefs seem to change depending on the type of educational experiences teachers receive (Pendergast, Garvis & Keogh, 2011). Actually, the current literature has pointed out some factors that influence the magnitude of the effectiveness of the relationship between self-efficacy and teachers' attitudes towards inclusion such as the volume of studies on teacher self-efficacy that have been conducted and the variety in the use of methods that give accurate results and therefore generalization of the findings (Fan et al., 2017). Moreover, others studies emphasizes on the importance of the cultural factor of the countries where the studies are conducted in understanding the relationship between the two variables (Moberg et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2018). Similarly, Vieluf et al. (2013) found the differentiation of teachers' sense of self-efficacy between countries due to differences in cultural value orientation, their response styles and variety of educational policies of each country (Schwab, 2020).

Conclusion

Overall, based on what was mentioned before, it is impossible drawing a single conclusion regarding the connection between teachers' attitudes and how effective they feel in implementing inclusion. On the one hand, researchers have found a high correlation between the concepts (Omer, 2015; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Malinen et al., 2013; Yada & Savolainen, 2017), while others consider it weak or insignificant (Carew et al., 2018). Despite the connections that have been found between teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs (Miesera et al. 2018), there is absence of conclusive evidence on the most likely causal relationship between the two constructs. Therefore, future research is suggested to focus further on investigating this relationship.

Moreover, although the relationship between self-efficacy and teacher attitudes appears to be universal, research has shown the effect of certain variables such as experience teaching SEN students, special education training, and sources of self-efficacy may influence it in different countries (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2019; Yada et al., 2018). Therefore, it is necessary to conduct further research to investigate the effect of variables on the relationship between self-efficacy and attitudes. In any case, effective teacher education programs can influence teacher efficacy for inclusion (Sokal, Woloshyn, & Funk-Unrau, 2014; Taliaferro, Hammond, & Wyant, 2015; Martins & Chacon, 2021) and thus improve teachers' attitudes.

Lastly, although the interrelation of teachers' attitudes and sense of self-efficacy has been studied to a certain extent, at this point it is necessary to point out that the research so far leaves unclear the effect of self-efficacy and attitudes on actual behavior (such as the use of inclusive practices) (Carew et al., 2018). Thus, a major implication for future work is needed to clarify the relationship among teachers' self-efficacy, attitudes, and behavior in classroom. More likely is the positive effect of inclusive practices on students' educational experiences (van Steen & Wilson, 2020), helping to develop a more inclusive society in the future.

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