

Educational Outcomes for Students with Special Needs: The Impact of Support and Resources on Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract

This article defines a theoretical framework for reviewing factors that affect a teacher's self-efficacy as they work to impact the educational outcomes for students with special needs. Bandura's Social-Cognitive Theory is utilized on the basis that one's belief in his ability to be effective has a direct impact on his effectiveness. This information will contribute greatly to the field of education and the work of administrators who seek answers for increasing teachers' self-efficacy as society continues to move toward the inclusion of those with disabilities.

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The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 is the guiding legislation for the education of all students with disabilities in our great nation. One component of IDEIA is the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which is the legal document that ensures each child with a disability has access to the general curriculum in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This article will seek to explain how a teacher's perception is impacted by the support and resources received. Furthermore, literature will be reviewed to establish a connection between teachers' perceptions and educational outcomes for students with special needs.

Because law has directed us to provide access to the general curriculum for all students, "the percentage of students with disabilities who are served in general education settings for 80% or more of the school day has increased from 45% to 52%" (NCES, 2007b). This shift in educational setting for students with disabilities is a great move forward; however, how are we to ensure that placement in the regular education setting will lead to increased student achievement?

Based on research conducted by Sari, Clikoz and Secer in 2009, teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education were affected by their self-efficacy perceptions in terms of their teaching. Interestingly, in the same study conducted by Sari et al. (2009), student teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education were higher than teachers who are currently in the field. This difference in teachers' attitudes may be due to the fact that student teachers have recently taken a course on special education (Sari et al., 2009); however, the varying attitudes may be due to the current teacher's perception of the support received. "Early research stressed that successful inclusive efforts are associated with administrative support, adequate material and personnel resources," (Gaad & Kahn, 2007, p.102). Notable, the majority of mainstream teachers stated that they need support

from parents and administrators when it comes to what is expected of their students, (Gaad & Khan, 2007).

Based on the utilization of Bandura's Social-Cognitive Theory, this article will seek to answer the question, "Does access to resources and supports increase teachers' perception that they can have an impact on the educational outcomes of students with special needs?"

Theory

Self-efficacy is the individual's faith in his ability to successfully demonstrate behaviors required to attain an expected result (Sari et al., 2009). Bandura (1977, 1986) gave superiority to the concept of self-efficacy in his social learning theory. Based on Bandura (1997), the formal definition of self-efficacy is, "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p.31). "Self-Efficacy theory posits that the perception of one's ability affects one's thoughts, feelings, motivation, and actions" (Paneque & Barbetta, 2006, p.171). "Bandura has emphasized self-efficacy as people's perception of their competence in dealing with their environment and exercising influence over events that effect their lives" (Miller, 2011, p.243). In 1986, Bandura went on to state that self-efficacy perception affects an individual's choice of activities, perseverance in the face of hardships, and level of their efforts and performance. It is important to note that perceived self-efficacy is the belief in one's competence to tackle difficult or novel tasks and to cope with adversity in specific demanding situations (Luszczynska et al., 2005).

The concept of self-efficacy lends itself to the research question, "Does access to resources and supports increase teachers' perception that they can have an impact on the educational outcomes of students with special needs?" According to Paneque and Barbetta, a teacher's efficacy beliefs can influence their behavior regarding the choices they make, the effort they expend toward students and tasks, and their perseverance under adverse conditions. One could deduce that the teaching of students with disabilities in a mainstream classroom could be considered an adverse condition and that a teacher's self-efficacy would impact his or her performance in that situation. "Overall, efficacious teachers tend to engage in more productive, quality teaching behaviors" (Paneque & Barbetta, 2006, p.172).

Given that a teacher's efficacy does have an impact on performance in the classroom, it is appropriate to assume there would be a markable difference in impact for a teacher given his/her level of self-efficacy. According to Paneque and Barbetta, teachers with low efficacy feel that they only have minimal influence on student achievement. Bandura (1997) asserted that persons with low self-efficacy have low self-esteem and harbor pessimistic thoughts about their accomplishments and personal development. Likewise, according to Bandura (1986) individuals with high self-efficacy perception concerning a specific situation make a great effort to accomplish a task, and they do not simply backtrack when they encounter trouble and act with persistence and perseverance. Sari, Celikioz and Secer (2009) confirmed this belief by sharing that those individuals who possess a positive view of their performance because of their experiences has a higher

self-efficacy. “Also, teachers with a high sense of efficacy have a strong conviction that they can influence student learning, even the learning of those students who may be more challenging,” (Guskey & Passaro, 1994). People with high self-efficacy choose to perform more challenging tasks (Luszczynska et al., 2005).

A review of teachers, both student teachers and practicing teachers, yielded a variety of results. “The scores of the teachers’ self-efficacy were higher than the student teacher’s scores,” (Sari et al., 2009). Wood and Benton (2005) shared that preservice teachers should be informed about how teacher feelings and expectations can influence the self-efficacy of students with disabilities. In regards to male and female teachers, female students had more positive views about inclusion than male students did and they had higher self-efficacy beliefs (Romi & Leyser, 2006).

“Similar to self-efficacy, optimism is theorized to influence human behavior through its effect on goal striving and motivation” (Luszczynska et al., 2005, p.82). This information leads us to believe that those who are optimistic have high self-efficacy, which leads to improved educational outcomes. This information, as well as others based on the measure of one’s optimism and self-efficacy, is based on self-reporting via a questionnaire.

As with any research; however, there can be limitations. One fear of conducting research by way of a questionnaire is the concept of social desirability which may influence individual’s responses (Gaad & Khan, 2007). When conducting research via questionnaire, the researcher has to remain cognizant of social desirability and ensure this is addressed with those subjects participating in the research so individuals will share their true thoughts and opinions.

Another theory that closely aligns with this literature review is the Attribution Theory. Weiner (2000) conceptualized that attribution theory is comprised of two related subtheories: intrapersonal and interpersonal. Weiner went on to explain that the interpersonal theory of motivation concerns the judgment of those we consider significant others (teachers, coaches, peers, etc.) make in response to an individual’s success or failure. “Intrapersonal theory of motivation focuses on the explanations an individual gives in response to an event, about the laws (internal, external), stability (stable, unstable), and controllability (controllable, uncontrollable) of the cause of his or her success or failure” (Weiner, p.154). Although this theory does have a relationship to the current question, the social cognitive theory most clearly aligns.

Student Outcomes

Bandura (1986) defines learning as “knowledge acquisition through cognitive processing of information” (p.235). Romie and Leyser identified personal teaching efficacy as the belief that he or she has the skills and abilities to influence students’ learning and behavior. Tschannen-Moran and Wolfolk-Hoy (2001) reported that teacher efficacy beliefs were related to student outcomes, such as achievement motivation and even the students’ own sense of self-efficacy. This is confirmed by Miller (2011) who states that,

“self efficacy affects all types of behavior-academic, social, and recreational” (p. 243). “Numerous positive outcomes have been associated with teacher’s high sense of self-efficacy--among these are student achievement” (Paneque & Barbetta, 2006, p. 172).

Further confirmation that teacher’s self-efficacy affects student achievement comes from Romi and Leyser (2006) where they found the following: “teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs have been related to a variety of student outcomes and to teacher classroom behavior” (p.88). Furthermore, Bandura (1997) shared that teacher efficacy affects teachers’ thoughts, actions in the teaching process, their effort and their dedication and willingness to improve student achievement. The above research confirms that teacher efficacy does have an impact on student achievement as asked in the research question; however, Tschannen-Moran and Wolfolk-Hoy (2001) indicated that further research is needed since, consistently over time, high teacher efficacy has indicated a strong relationship to student outcomes.

Support and Resources

Lambe and Bones (2006) identified “key issues that student teachers feel need to be addressed to ensure they can become effective teachers in the inclusive classroom” (p. 180). Two of those areas related to the need for resources and training. According to Lambe and Bones (2006), the first need to be addressed is “providing sufficient resources and reducing class size” and secondly, “providing training to promote positive attitudes to inclusion and special educational needs among all teachers” (p. 180). Gaad and Khan (2007) state that results from their research stated that “results also indicated that teachers perceive additional training, support from administrators and access to related services and resources as necessary in order to meet the needs of their students with special educational needs in the mainstream education setting” (p.95). Studies also confirm the need for reduced class sizes, more resources and more support services (Gaad & Khan, 2007; Paneque & Barbetta, 2006). “Teachers indicated they need more instructional resources, additional resource people, more funds and assistance in dealing with school administrators” (Gaad & Khan, 2007, p. 106). Teachers in the same study went on to request training for school administrators, stating that they need motivation and understanding from them if they are to be successful in educating students with special educational needs in their classrooms (Gaad & Khan, 2007).

According to McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy and Terry (2010), “the lack of exceptional education content may lead principals to begin their careers without the ability to effectively oversee concerns (programmatic or personal) related to students with exceptionalities” (p.3). McHatton et al. (2010) went on to state that “principals’ increased awareness of special education and gifted education issues facilitate greater support of special education and gifted education teachers, responsiveness to program issues, and promotion of ongoing reflection” (p.5). “Findings indicate that principals who report having more knowledge about special education were more involved in special education programs. Administrative support for best-practices in the classroom and knowledge of legislation for student with exceptionalities leads to improved outcomes for students in these programs” (McHatton et al., 2010, p.5).

This information is critical, given 95% of principals said they frequently participate in teacher observations; however, only 45% of administrators feel they are prepared to do so (McHatton et al., 2010). Administrators also reported that the majority of their time with Exceptional Child Education is spent in teacher observations; however, approximately one-third of the administrators in this study indicated they were well prepared by their preparation programs to conduct these teacher observations (Mchatton, et al., 2010). Clearly, “that indicates principals who have a broader understanding of exceptional student education can foster an environment more conducive to improving outcomes for these student” (McHatton, et al., 2010, p. 16).

Although administrative support is crucial in the process of educating students with special needs, additional resources are also needed. One such resource is funding. Sari, Celikoz and Secer (2009) found “the reason for the negative attitudes of teachers and student teachers towards inclusive education may be from the policy of the local education authorities with which financial support is not given to the schools to do this” (p.39). Hodkinson (2006) believes that further research is needed to determine if the lack of financial support is undermining the successful implementation of students with special needs into the regular education classroom. In addition to funding for the district and schools, teachers need more resources such as proven instructional materials and equipment that is appropriate for the individual needs of the students.

Gaad and Khan (2007) found that teachers’ rejection of inclusion oftentimes stemmed from lack of support and resources. Teachers in their study indicated a lack of instructional materials, lack of time to produce instructional materials, and lack of time to consult with experienced teachers contributed to their rejection of inclusion practices. “Most teachers also indicated they would like to receive training on strategies on behavioral management, discipline and strategies for adapting instruction and incorporating various instructional methods into a lesson” (Gaad & Kahn, 2007, p. 102). Teachers in the Gaad and Khan (2007) study went on to indicate “they would also like to receive training in special education particularly in learning about the characteristics of students with special needs, inclusion and the individualized education program” (p.102). According to Hodkinson (2006), “the data further highlights a greater percentage of the participants are now of the opinion that additional training in the pedagogy of inclusion is important” (p.51).

Discussion

A review of current literature indicates that administrators can benefit from increased knowledge of students’ special education needs so they can, in turn, provide additional supports to staff. One could deduct that improved self-efficacy in the teacher would, in turn, improve educational outcomes for students with or without special needs. Further research will be needed to produce the evidence necessary to support the theory that improved support and resources will affect a teacher’s self-efficacy. Without question, the research referenced throughout this article provides evidence that a teacher’s self-efficacy, low or high, does have an effect on student achievement.

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