

Sense of self-efficacy of primary school teachers regarding the right to the inclusive education of children with special educational needs: a survey in the regional unit of Attica

¹Fouka Adamantia, ²Balias Stathis

¹Teacher

²Professor at the University of Patras

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7496610>

Published Date: 01-January-2023

Abstract: Students with special educational needs/disability are increasingly attending general schools within the framework of inclusive education. For this reason, teachers is necessary to maintain a high level of self-efficacy so that they can meet the requirements of the "School for All". Self-efficacy is of great importance for the modern educational reality, since it has a positive effect on the choice of teaching methods that promote unified education (Zee & Koomen, 2016 as cited in Kataki, 2017) but also on the learning outcomes and self-efficacy of students (TschannenMoran & Hoy, 2007).The aim of the research is to investigate the self-efficacy perceptions of teachers and the effect of demographic factors on it. The results of the survey showed that teachers generally feel quite self-efficacious in the multitude of special educational needs of students in all three dimensions. Of course, statistically significant differences were identified in their answers due to the effect of the studied variables.

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

1. INTRODUCTION

The International Declaration of Salamanca (UNESCO, 1994) was a milestone for the implementation of the principles of inclusive education in general schools. The benefits of co-educational classes do not only concern the cognitive domain, but also the issue of socialization (Sysoeva Constantino & Anokhin, 2018).

Research shows that teachers display a low sense of self-efficacy (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007), characterizing the inclusion of these students in co-educational classes as a challenge (Monsen et al., 2014) and filling them with insecurity about teaching children with SEN (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2018; Theodoulou, 2018).

The concept of self-efficacy is based on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, according to which efficacy is "the belief in one's abilities to perform their work in defined work conditions and bring positive results to each type of student they have to teach (Fackler & Malmberg, 2016; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2018). Each teacher's sense of effectiveness is affected by many factors such as age. In other words, teachers' age by extension is inextricably linked to their experience (Motallebzadeh, Ashraf & Yazdi, 2014). On the contrary, other researches (Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Fackler & Malmberg, 2016) did not demonstrate correlation between general experience and teacher self-efficacy. Also, in researches by Tsakiridou & Polyzopoulou (2014); Urton, Wilbert & Hennemann (2014); Koullapi & Lyra (2020: 31–58); Lee, Cawthon & Dawson (2013) it appeared that the youngest teachers presented much more positive in the philosophy of inclusive education than the rest. Nevertheless, teachers' sense of self-efficacy in teaching children with special educational needs is an important factor in shaping their self-efficacy and it changes depending on their teaching experience in teaching these children (Malinen, 2013).

In addition, adequate teacher training can play a key role in increasing their sense of self-efficacy, which in turn will benefit the students themselves (Theodoulou, 2018). In fact, their level of education was found to be positively related to their sense of self-efficacy (Shaukat et al., 2013).

Another factor that affects teachers' sense of self-efficacy is relationships that develop between them and children's parents, between teachers themselves, between them and their students, and also between them and their superiors (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014; Tsakiridou, 2016).

The research questions posed are as follows:

1. How do teachers rate their degree of effectiveness in inclusive practice? (Study in three axes: a) the teaching strategies they apply, b) the classroom management and c) the involvement and commitment of the students during the learning process)
2. Which factors (professional expertise and training in special education, work experience, gender, age, type of special educational needs, previous experience in teaching children with special educational needs) influence the assessment of teachers' sense of self-efficacy in inclusive practice?

Previous research has shown teachers' low effectiveness for inclusion of all students in their classes but also the necessity of a general restructuring of the entire school system (Fyssa & Vlachou, 2015; Fyssa, Vlachou & Avramidis, 2014). Thus, solutions will be proposed with the aim of reducing those parameters that act as a burden on teachers' self-efficacy levels.

2. METHODOLOGY

Sample and research tool

Our sample were 59 teachers of primary education that took part in this research which was conducted in the region of Attica from May to August 2022. Concerning to the selection of sample, probability sampling techniques were used and especially stratified sampling was selected. The selection of the sample has been based both on the representativeness of the primary teachers in relation to the distribution of the total teacher population and on the sufficient dispersion of the sample in order to ensure the representativeness of the sample. Data was analyzed with "SPSS Statistics, 28.0.1.0".

In terms of gender, most participants are women (89,8 %, N=53) whereas men are less (10,1%, N=6). Most participants belong to younger age, up to 35 years old (N=45, 76,2%), while only 14 participants were over 36 years old (23,7%). Moreover, 31 participants (52,5 %) stated that they worked as general education teachers and 28 participants (47,4%) as special education teachers. As far as their specialization in Special Education, 31 teachers do not have any specialization (52,5%) and others 28 have (47,4%). Concerning their educational experience, the majority has up to 4 years of teaching experience (N= 41, 69,4%) while others have 5 years and above (N=18,30,5%). In addition, only 7 participants stated that there is a disabled child in their family (11,8%), whereas only 4 teachers said that they don't have a student with Special Educational Needs or a disability in their class (6,7%).

In order to answer these research questions, an online questionnaire was created which consisted of 7 questions about demographic factors and 29 questions where Likert scale was applied. The questionnaire (https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSexC0igF7SNFF6MUkk1Wk-7DznOTUeZwOOKMTsc291-Wa0lZA/viewform?usp=sf_link) was created with google forms as it is an easy way to answer the questions and submit it online, facilitating, thus, the collection of data. The questionnaire contained an introductory part, where it was clearly stated that the questionnaire was part of the researcher's M.A thesis and that it addressed teachers. There was also confirmation that anonymity is preserved and reassurance that data collected by the questionnaire would be used solely for the purposes of facilitating research. Questionnaire based in Teacher Self-efficacy Scale (Ohio State teacher efficacy scale, OSTES, Tschannen-Moran & WoolfolkHoy, 2001, Adaptation: Poulou, 2007). Questions divided into 5 subscales based on the tool by Sharma, Loreman and Forlin (2012) who developed scales to measure teachers' self-efficacy related to educational inclusion.

-views for their self-efficacy according to the type of educational needs

-self-efficacy for cooperation with colleagues

-self-efficacy for classroom management self-efficacy that assesses the extent to which teachers can manage disruptive behaviors and cultivate obedience to classroom rules.

-self-efficacy for instructional strategies that assesses the extent to which teachers can adequately manage instructional strategies, implement alternative learning strategies, assessment strategies, design challenging activities, provide alternative explanations, cultivate their creative thinking

-self-efficacy for student engagement that assesses the extent to which teachers believe they can teach and motivate students with special educational needs and to value learning.

Statistical analysis- issues of credibility and validity

Survey data were analyzed with SPSS 28 0.1.0. Also, we used descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage) accompanied by linear regression analysis to analyze demographic responses and the effect of demographic variables on teachers' sense of self-efficacy. The dependent variable of this research is the sense of self efficacy and the independent variable are gender, age, specialization in Special Education, educational experience, their work in special or general education, the existence of disabled child in their family or class.

Significance level (p-value) was two-sided and it was defined as $p < 0,05$ (5%). In research, a two-tailed test is used when the aim is to evaluate whether a variable has an impact on either direction (to check whether scores are higher or lower). In this specific research, the aim was to evaluate whether a variable (i.e gender) affects another one (i.e sense of self efficacy). Two- tailed tests are more common in research (Yockey, 2018:121).

Internal consistency and validity

In order to check the internal consistency and validity of the variables which are related to the teachers' sense of self efficacy, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used. For all questions Cronbach's alpha is 0,925.

Validity of the present research tool is ensured by the selection of homogeneous, suitable and topic-related questions and by the piloting conducted with a sample of 10% of the population who participated in the research. Feedback led to proper adaptations so that questions were of utmost clarity which eliminates the chances of false or accidental responses. In this research, questions were grouped in terms of content. Each group of questions was checked for its internal consistency with Cronbach alpha. The results showed that the Internal consistency of the variables is satisfactory since the value of Cronbach's alpha coefficient is $p > 0,6$ (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The internal validity of the questionnaire overall is $\alpha = 0,92$ which is considered to indicate high validity.

3. RESULTS

Teachers' views for their self-efficacy according to the type of educational needs

Initially, teachers' views will be examined on how effective and capable they feel to include children with disabilities in their classes in general, but also their positions will be reported on the inclusion of children according to their needs. Drawing on the findings, teachers think to a large extent that they can create a welcoming environment in their classroom for students with SEN ($M = 3,00$, $S.D. = 0,76$). Also, they seem more confident about their abilities to teach students with mild mental retardation, mobility problems, learning difficulties, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and behavioral problems ($M = 3$) and less confident with students with severe mental retardation ($M = 1$). Moreover, participants appeared to get frustrated to a small degree when teaching students with disabilities or special educational needs ($M = 1,00$, $S.D. = 0,85$).

Then it was examined whether gender differentiates the results of the answers to the above questions. Regarding the gender variable, a statistically significant difference was found in the teachers' responses regarding their self-efficacy in teaching children with mild mental retardation, with motor problems, learning and behavioral difficulties (values clearly smaller than 0.05), where male teachers seemed to feel more effective. Also, teachers working in general and special education gave different answers. In particular, teachers working in special education stated greater self efficacy in teaching children with mild and severe mental retardation, with learning difficulties, with ADHD and with the autism spectrum.

Moreover, specialization in special education proved to be a factor affecting teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and also teachers who have people with disabilities in their family feel more self efficacious. Moreover, teachers -who have students with SEN- have greater self efficacy about their belief in creating a welcoming environment in their classroom for students with SEN.

Self-efficacy beliefs about cooperation

The results of the analysis of the data showed the fairly teachers' high sense of self-efficacy in collaborating with other specialties and agencies ($M=3.00$, $S.D.=0.78$), with their colleagues ($M= 2.00$, $S.D. =1.02$) but also with the students' parents ($M.=3.00$ $S.D.=0.83$). Regarding the gender variable, a statistically significant difference was found in teachers' responses regarding their ability to work with students' parents to address difficulties. Male teachers proved to be more self efficacious.

Self-efficacy beliefs about inclusive classroom management

According to the results drawn from relevant data, teachers stated that they consider themselves effective to a satisfactory degree regarding the use of educational strategies required in an inclusive classroom. Specifically, they declared their effectiveness in answering difficult questions to a large extent ($M=3$, $SD=0.79$), in creating social interactions between students ($M=2.50$, $SD=0.73$) to a fairly satisfactory degree as well as in the ability to allocate the necessary time to each student according to their needs ($M= 2.00$, $SD=0.91$). In addition, it is stated the sense of how effective they consider themselves to be in terms of the ability to prevent disruptive behaviors in the classroom ($M=2.00$, $SD=0.81$) as well as to inspire students to adhere to the classroom rules ($M= 2.00$, $S.D.=0.81$).

Regarding the gender variable, a statistically significant difference was found in the teachers' responses regarding the ability to allocate the necessary time to pay attention to each student, the confidence to prevent disruptive behavior and the ability to answer difficult questions and guide adherence to rules, where men showed to be more self efficacious. Also, teachers over the age of 36 appeared to be slightly more confident in their ability to guide students in following classroom rules.

A statistically significant difference was observed in teachers' responses: teachers with more than 4 years of teaching experience appeared to have a greater sense of confidence in guiding students to obey classroom rules and in responding to students' difficult questions.

Self-efficacy beliefs about educational strategies

Regarding teachers' self-efficacy in using learning strategies, teachers feel quite effective in applying alternative methods ($M=3.00$, $S.D.= 0.80$), in assessing the consolidation of the material ($M=3.00$, $S.D.=0.90$), in planning demanding activities ($M=3.00$, $S.D.=0.86$), in providing a variety of answers and examples to students ($M=3.00$, $S.D. =0.72$) and in cultivating their critical thinking ($M=3.00$, $SD=0.86$). Also, the interviewed teachers declared quite effective for the use of a variety of assessment strategies ($M=2.00$, $S.D.=1.00$).

Regarding the gender variable, a statistically significant difference was found in the teachers' responses regarding their ability to use a variety of strategic methods, assessment methods, to consolidate the material taught, to provide explanations and to enhance critical thinking. It should be noted the predominance of male teachers about their sense of self efficacy.

Then it was examined whether age differentiates the results of the answers to the above questions. Indeed, teachers over 36 years old feel more efficacious concerning educational strategies with the exception of planning challenging activities.

Regarding teachers' sense of self-efficacy in applying educational strategies, special education teachers seem to have a higher sense of confidence in using alternative learning methods.

Self-efficacy beliefs about student mobilization

Regarding teachers' beliefs about student motivation, their high self-efficacy was found regarding the degree to which they make students appreciate the value of learning ($M=4.00$, $SD=0.86$), explain the expected behavior from them ($M=3.00$, $S.D.=0.79$) and the push they give them to cope with the school demands ($M= 3.00$, $S.D.=0.77$).

Then it was examined whether gender differentiates the results of the answers to the above questions. Regarding the gender variable, a statistically significant difference was found in teachers' responses regarding the effort they make for students to value learning and for them to cope with the demands of the school. Men's responses showed greater self efficacy in terms of the effort they make so that students appreciate the value of learning and believe that they can cope with the demands of the school.

The responses of either special or general education teachers and those with and without specialization in special education did not differ in terms of their self-efficacy in motivating students. Similarly, previous teaching experience, the existence of a child with a disability in the family and a student with a disability in the classroom, did not seem to differentiate the self-efficacy beliefs of teachers in terms of motivating students.

4. CONCLUSION

Concluding this research, the overall impression is that general education teachers have a sufficiently high sense of self-efficacy for teaching children with special educational needs in their classroom. Indeed, their views differed according to severity of educational needs, gender, work in general or special education, specialization in special education, the presence of a disabled child in the family and students with disabilities in their class.

Regarding the management of an inclusive classroom, teachers declared themselves quite effective for all suggestions. Their answers depended on their gender and age. Regarding beliefs about their effectiveness in using educational strategies, teachers feel quite effective. Their views are related to gender, age, work in general or special education and educational experience. Similarly, teachers appeared to consider themselves quite effective in motivating students, whereas the answers given seemed to depend on gender and age.

The findings of this research reveal that self-efficacy in student motivation and instructional strategies is higher than other dimensions of self-efficacy ($M= 3.33$). This is followed by self-efficacy in collaboration ($M= 2.66$) and then self-efficacy in classroom management ($M=2.30$). In addition, it is worth noting the superiority of male teachers in their sense of self-efficacy in all three components: classroom management, educational strategies, cooperation. This finding is in agreement with research by Gkolia, Dimitrios and Koustelios (2016) possibly due to the stricter discipline imposed by teachers, the control of disruptive student behaviors and the motivation of students to engage in the learning process. In contrast, Shaukat and Iqbal (2012), found no significant difference between males and females regarding their degree of self-efficacy, teaching practices and student motivation. However, men appeared to be more competent in matters related to classroom management. Conversely, other surveys recorded higher female teachers' level of efficacy regarding inclusion than that of males (Karimvand, 2011; Woodcock, 2011), whereas other studies underlined the ineffective role of the gender variable on teachers' efficacy regarding inclusion (Dolapçı&Yıldız-Demirtaş, 2016; Şahbaz&Kalay 2010). It is obvious, therefore, that existing literature fails to reveal a clear reference point for researchers and so further research is needed to develop this understanding.

Concerning the factors affecting teachers' self efficacy, age is another variable that has been examined. In our research, teachers' self-efficacy beliefs appeared to be influenced by their age in all three dimensions, with older teachers tending to feel more competent. These results are confirmed by Gkolia et al. (2016) where older teachers appeared to be more effective in managing and engaging their students, while no correlation was observed between age and the degree of self-efficacy regarding the strategies they used in the classroom. In contrast, research by Shaukat and Iqbal (2012) found that younger teachers were characterized by a higher sense of effectiveness in classroom management and student involvement, while no relationship was observed between age and the implementation of teaching practices. On the contrary, other research showed the absence of the effect of age on teachers' sense of self-efficacy (Ruble, Usher & McGrew, 2011).

In addition, special education training did not appear to influence teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, a finding consistent with that of Akbari &Moradkhani (2010). Of course, in research (Tzivnikou, 2015), general and special education teachers who attend relevant seminars develop high efficacy beliefs for the management of students with learning difficulties and behavioral problems. Similarly, training on the education of students with special needs within integration classrooms significantly increased teachers' efficacy towards inclusion (Chao, Forlin, & Ho, 2016; Sharma, Shaukat, &Furlonger, 2015; Fisher,2017: 157-171).

Regarding educational experience, this appeared to influence their views on how effective they feel regarding educational strategies, with those with more experience feeling more prepared to teach in an inclusive classroom. Similarly, Morris et al (2017) found that self-efficacy is shaped by teachers' past experiences, with those teachers with more experience having developed appropriate skills and strategies due to more problem-solving opportunities. This result is consistent with those studies reporting that self-efficacy beliefs of experienced teachers are higher (Specht et al, 2015). On the contrary, research (Tschannen - Moran & Johnson, 2011) observed no correlation between teaching experience and self-efficacy. Conversely, in Toy and Duru's (2016) study, efficacy level concerning inclusive education of teachers with 1–15 years of occupational experience was higher compared to that of relatively more experienced teachers. Similarly, in research by Fisher (2017: 157-171), teachers with less experience showed more positive attitudes towards inclusion than did their counterparts.

Regarding more general contact with disabled people, in our research it appeared that teachers who had previously been in contact with children with disabilities/special educational needs in the family environment feel fairly or very self-

efficacious, especially in terms of classroom management and use of educational strategies. On the other hand, teachers who did not have/have students with SEN in their class showed that they felt less effective mainly in terms of cooperation with parents and other colleagues. In the research of Specht et al (2015) results showed that intimacy with a person with disabilities is related to higher self-efficacy, since positive personal experiences with such categories of people tend to reduce stereotypical views about them.

It should be stressed however, that teachers' sense of self-efficacy is a variable that is influenced by both personal and environmental factors, so it becomes difficult to investigate it as well as draw a single conclusion (Klassen & Ming Ming Chu, 2010). In any case, appropriate and continuous training of educational staff regarding current developments in inclusive education is considered necessary.

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