Teachers of Students with Autism: An Investigation of Teacher Self-Efficacy

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Introduction

- During the past decade, there has been a 500% increase of students with autism coupled with a shortage of special education teachers.
- Research examining the nature of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and associated factors will help begin to identify factors important for maintaining teachers within the field of education as well as producing potentially better child outcomes.
- *Self-efficacy* has been described as the belief in one's ability to organize and execute actions effectively (Bandura, 1997) and influences personal effort, motivation, and resiliency (Soto & Goetz, 1998).
- Educators with high self-efficacy are more likely to have higher instructional aspirations, use innovative teaching techniques, exhibit greater coping resources, persevere with low achievers, and obtain higher student achievement than those with low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).
- Although numerous studies have investigated self-efficacy among educators, their primary focus has been within the general education arena.
- Special educators are at significant risk for developing elevated levels of stress and burnout (Antoniou, Polychroni & Walters, 2000), which has been described as a "crisis in self-efficacy" (Leiter, 1992).
- Research indicates that special education teachers of students with *autism* may display even more elevated levels of stress and burnout given the multifaceted deficits (language/communication, behavior, and social functioning) their students present (Jennett, Harris, & Mesibov, 2003).

Purpose

- The purpose of this study is to provide preliminary findings on correlates of self-efficacy among teachers of students with autism through an examination of factors such as stress, burnout, perceived support, and teacher engagement.
- Implications of the findings are provided as well as a discussion of future research.

Method

Participants

- Thirty-five teachers who were responsible for at least one child with autism participated.
- 94% of the participants were women and had an mean class/caseload size of 12.8 students (*SD* = 7.9) .
- Teachers came from two Midwestern states (15 urban; 20 small city/rural schools).

Procedure

- Approval to collect data was approved by university IRB and from district directors of special education.
- Teachers of students (ages 3- to 8-year old) with autism were recruited.
- Once contact and consent were established participants were mailed assessment packets (including self-report measures) at the beginning of the school year.

Measures

Scale	Measuring/Subscales Used	# of Items	Type of Scale
Teacher Interpersonal Self-Efficacy Scale (TISES; Brouwers & Tomic, 2001)	Classroom Management, Support from Colleagues, Support from Principal	24	6-point Likert
Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ; Bass & Avolio, 1995)	Support from Administrator	45	5-point Likert
Index of Teacher Stress (ITS; Greene, Abidin, & Kmetz, 1997)	Self-doubt/Needs Support, Loss of Satisfaction from Teaching, Disrupts Teaching Process, Frustration Working with Parents	43	6-point Likert
Malasch Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996)	Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, Personal Accomplishments	22	7-point Likert
Teacher Knowledge Questionnaire (Designed by the authors as part of this study)	Teacher Knowledge	15	4-point Likert
Teacher Engagement Rating Scale (Designed by the authors as part of this study)	Level of Engagement between Teacher and Student with Autism	16	5-point Likert

Results

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations for Variables in the Study

Variable	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Self-Efficacy for Classroom Management	32	4.56	0.48													
2. Self-Efficacy for Obtaining Colleagues' Support	35	5.39	0.63	.26												
3. Self-Efficacy for Obtaining Principal's Support	35	5.18	0.97	.24	.14											
4. Teacher Knowledge	32	2.53	0.53	.14	.03	.18										
5. Perceived Instructional Support	29	3.03	0.47	.19	.13	.35	.06									
6. Support From Selected Administrator (MLQ)	24	2.82	0.75	.35	.14	.15	.28	.20								
7. Stress: Sense of Competency/ Need for Support	32	1.67	0.55	-.26	-.31	-.54**	-.36	-.34	-.27							
8. Stress: Loss of Satisfaction From Teaching	32	1.61	0.52	-.15	-.10	-.48**	-.14	-.24	-.12	.85**						
9. Stress: Disruption of the Teaching Process	34	2.03	0.82	-.23	-.21	-.44**	-.03	-.37	-.35	.87**	.86**					
10. Stress: Frustration Working With Parents	34	1.36	0.61	-.38*	-.23	-.38*	-.04	-.26	.15	.44*	.40*	.38*				
11. MBI: Personal Accomplishments	34	4.99	0.80	.43*	.18	.18	-.08	.15	.21	-.25	-.36*	-.43*	-.07			
12. MBI: Emotional Exhaustion	35	2.10	1.06	-.44*	-.06	-.03	-.14	-.23	-.44*	.28	.30	.41*	.18	-.34*		
13. MBI: Depersonalization	33	0.61	0.69	-.38*	.02	.00	-.06	-.11	-.21	.36*	.36*	.47**	.15	-.35*	.47**	
14. Teacher Engagement Rating Scale	32	2.38	0.31	.14	.07	.40*	-.13	.17	-.09	-.30	-.35	-.23	-.50**	.28	.10	-.03
15. Years of Teaching	35	10.66	7.59	-.14	-.07	.26	.22	.27	.20	-.30	-.28	-.28	.07	.01	-.10	-.10	.03

* *p* < .05 . ** *p* < .01.

Results (continued)

- **Self-efficacy for classroom management** was negatively related to measures tapping emotional exhaustion and teachers' tendency to view their students in a depersonalized manner, but positively related to personal accomplishments and stress associated with working with parents.
- **Self-efficacy for obtaining principal support** was negatively related to all four indexes of teacher stress and positively related to teacher engagement (i.e., direct observation of teacher behavior).
- **Self-efficacy for obtaining support from colleagues** did not yield significant associations with any of the measures.
- Educators who perceived having greater **support from their administrator** reported less emotional exhaustion from teaching.
- No measure of **self-efficacy** was associated with teacher knowledge or years of teaching experience.
- **Stress related to working with parents** was negatively related to teacher engagement.

Discussion

- Understanding the associations between learning outcomes of students with autism and the self-efficacy beliefs, burnout, and stress of their teachers is important. Although teacher self-efficacy has been shown to relate to various student outcomes among general education teachers, a greater understanding of how teacher beliefs affect children with autism seems warranted.
- Few studies have examined the relationship between teacher affect and actual observations of teachers' behavior in the classroom. Hence, we were particularly interested to find that teachers who experience stress with their students' parents are less engaged with students. Conversely, those who are confident that they can enlist their principal's support seem to engage more with students. These findings deserve closer scrutiny.
- Examinations of administrative support and accountability as well as the degree of specialized training educators are receiving in order to address the needs of students with autism may provide further details on how teacher self- efficacy beliefs are developed and sustained. Indeed, one important next step is to investigate the sources underlying the efficacy beliefs held by teachers of students with autism.
- Although the significant associations obtained in this cross-sectional study are consistent with those obtained from previous research with special education teachers, longitudinal analyses would certainly provide a clearer picture.

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