

Thesis Introduction Example

An Investigation on Teachers' Self-Efficacy towards Inclusive Education in Singapore Kindergarten Classrooms

Introduction

This proposed study seeks to advance knowledge about how general education teachers, specifically kindergarten teachers, are responding to inclusive education in Singapore. Presently there is no legislation that mandates inclusive educational practices for special needs children. Nonetheless, in the recent years, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has invested considerable resources toward training teachers and providing infrastructure to integrate special needs children in the regular school system. Additionally, specifically to kindergarten education, MOE has published a curriculum framework for kindergartens in 2003 that aim to provide a learning environment for all children, acknowledging the fact that each individual has different ways of learning, with individual preferences and abilities. This, further augmented by the encouragement from the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) for child care centres to integrate children with mild disabilities, lends an increasing support to having an inclusive education system that includes all children with their many differences and education needs.

Children with differences and disabilities are a significant concern and responsibility of the community. Kindergarten teachers have a critical role in inclusive settings for facilitating the needs of these children. Such integrated settings can provide enriching experiences for all children. More importantly, it has been well-established that early intervention is critical for special learning needs children (Talay-Ongan, 2001). There is a need, therefore, to examine how kindergarten teachers are responding to this range of learning and behavioural needs in general education classrooms.

Research Problem

Yet, to date, little research has been undertaken locally to understand what inclusion means to the kindergarten teachers and the extent to which their efficacy is towards teaching in an inclusive classroom. Research has long asserted that teachers' self-efficacy, that is – teachers' "judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated" (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) – is an important determinant and predictor of teaching practices (cf. Dewey, 1929; Fenstermacher, 1986; Lortie, 1975; Pajares, 1992). Although there are numerous researches done on the investigation of teachers' self-efficacy with respect to teaching outcomes, there have been few examinations performed between teachers' self-efficacy and teaching in an inclusive nature (Brownell & Pajares, 1999; Woolfson & Brady, 2009). Understanding the relationship between general education teachers' efficacy beliefs to instruct and manage students with learning and behavioural difficulties and their perceptions of

success in educating such students is important to inclusion efforts (Brownell & Pajares, 1999; Woolfson & Brady, 2009).

Research Aims

Thus, the purpose of the study is to shed light on kindergarten teachers' efficacy towards inclusive education as it is currently practiced with a view to uncovering strengths, limitations, and directions for possible refinement in teacher's training and in-service professional development. Specific questions of interest are:

1. How do the general education kindergarten teachers' perceive their self-efficacy towards teaching in an inclusive environment?
2. Is there any difference between the general education kindergarten teachers' and special needs trained kindergarten teachers' perceived self-efficacy towards teaching in an inclusive environment?
3. What is the relationship between teacher experience and further professional development training and the outcome variable: self-efficacy beliefs regarding teaching students with learning difficulties?

Definitions

Inclusive Learning Environment

Inclusion is commonly defined as serving students with a full range of abilities and disabilities in the general education classroom with appropriate in-class support (Crawford, 1994; Roach, 1995; LoVette, 1996; Salend, 2001). Inclusion and inclusive education are concerned with the quest for equity, social justice, participation, and the removal of all forms of exclusionary assumptions and practices. It is based on a positive view of difference and has at its heart the principle that all students, including those who are 'different', are considered to be valued and respected members of the school community. As such, they contribute to the social structures of the school, to the curriculum and to the strategies used by teachers to teach all children. From this perspective, inclusive education is a complex process that requires a social view of disability and a deconstruction of 'special educational needs' as well as the restructuring and reorganization of each mainstream school and its curriculum and management structures in order to provide a culture and practice in which all barriers to participation can be identified and ultimately removed. The rationale for inclusive education is multifaceted and stems from legislative (at least in western countries such as United States of America), ethical, and empirical domains (cf. Cole, Mills, Dale, & Jenkins, 1991; Peck, Donaldson, & Pezzoli, 1990; UNESCO, 1994).

Difference between General Education and Special Education trained kindergarten teachers

Common in the education and psychological literature is the appreciation that every child is different from every other child and that every child learns differently (Heward, 2003). Teacher preparation programs purport to address the issue of individual differences and to help teachers nurture each child to fullest potential. However, special education is still conceived of as distinct from general education in Singapore. The primary mission of special education teacher preparation programs has been to train special education teachers. In recent years, however, there is an increasing demand for teachers skilled in both general and special education (e.g., National Council of Social Service, 2004). There are a growing number of special schools that provide for students with special needs but who are able to cope with the general education, mainstream curriculum. These include schools for children with sensory impairment, physical disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

In general education (mainstream) schools, there is also a growing awareness of children with special learning and behavioural needs. However, provisions in special education at initial teacher preparation programs in Singapore reside at the awareness and introductory levels and in largely non-core areas of study. For example, pre-service teacher preparation programs do not require teachers to take a compulsory core unit on understanding learners with special needs. It is then not surprising to find that when thrust with a class of inclusive learners; the general education trained teachers are often perplexed by their limited understanding of the diverse needs of learners, not to mention the compounded complexity of making appropriate curriculum-based decisions grounded in an understanding of learner needs.

Teachers' Self-Efficacy

Social cognitive theory postulates that efficacy beliefs influence the choices people make, as well as the effort and perseverance with which they engage in tasks (Bandura, 1986). This suggests that individuals pursue activities and situations in which they feel competent and avoid situations in which they doubt their capability to perform successfully (cf. Bandura, 1993, 1997; Pajares, 1996). For example, classroom teachers who believe they can successfully instruct students who have learning or behavioural problems are more likely to include such students in their classroom than teachers who doubt their ability to instruct or motivate these students (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Teachers' efficacy beliefs therefore can be seen as contextual judgments of their capability to succeed in particular instructional endeavours (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001).

As teachers' beliefs may be communicated directly or indirectly to their students (Dweck, Davidson, Nelson, & Enna, 1978; Kurtz, Schneider, Carr, Borkowski, & Rellinger, 1990), if students with learning difficulties are to experience the same positive aspects of education in inclusive settings as typically developing learners, they need to be taught by teachers who believe that they can produce positive educational outcomes for this group and who view themselves as capable of providing an effective instructional environment to bring this about. As teacher beliefs are likely to influence teacher behaviours (Kagan, 1992), it is important to

investigate these to ensure that they do not unintentionally constitute barriers to inclusion in the mainstream for students with special needs.

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