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Support of Educational Associates and Self-Efficacy for Teacher Cooperation

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Abstract: *The aim of this research is to determine the differences in the individual components of self-assessed self-efficacy for teachers' cooperation, taking into consideration whether educational associates provide them with adequate support in working with students with disabilities or not. In addition to the calculation of basic statistical parameters, in data processing, multivariate analysis of variance, t-test and discrimination analysis were used to calculate the differences between the observed groups. The obtained results show the presence of statistically significant differences in separate components of self-assessed self-efficacy for cooperation between teachers, taking into consideration whether educational associates provide them with adequate support in working with students with disabilities or not. The differences are evident both on the manifest and latent levels. However, the variables in which teachers who receive support from educational associates show a higher level of self-efficacy for cooperation mostly relate to administrative-organizational support and freedom of expression of opinion, so it is necessary to better conceptualize this cooperation and its components, as well as the factors affecting it. The contribution of this research is twofold. It consists in acquiring results that allow insight into the structure of self-assessed self-efficacy of teachers working in inclusive conditions in the area of one region in Croatia. On the other side, this work contributes to the interpretation of the possible connection between specific components of teacher self-efficacy for cooperation in inclusive conditions with factors that could influence it when it comes to the support of educational associates.*

Keywords: *self-efficacy for cooperation; teachers; educational associates; inclusive school.*

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Introduction

Most of the countries of the European Union and beyond express their intention to implement inclusive practices according to modern definitions. In the implementation of the above, two key questions are raised: whether teachers have confidence in their own abilities to teach all children and the continuous development of creative and new ways of teaching, and whether the implementation of inclusive practices truly ensured the expected results for students (Haug, 2017).

The fundamental determinants of the necessary competences of teachers, in this sense, are knowledge of the specificity of students and evaluation of their differences, knowledge of strategies for working with students, communication and cooperation skills, and readiness for permanent professional development. According to Skočić Mihić et al. (2014), specific competences for the education of children with special educational needs include awareness of the particular features of their individual educational needs, the ability to identify special educational needs, familiarity with the didactic-methodical approach and planning of an modified curriculum, knowledge of appropriate teaching methods, means and assistive technology, including high-tech aids, knowledge of counseling techniques, practice in the education of children with certain special educational needs, and readiness for teamwork, cooperation and lifelong education.

Apart from the fact that in some studies teachers assess their own competences worse when it comes to children with disabilities in inclusive conditions (Vizek Vidović, 2005; Pekeberg, 2012; Zrilić & Brzoja, 2013; Kuyini et al., 2016; Opić & Kudek Mirošević, 2018; Majoko, 2019), it is interesting to investigate that, although teachers sought and are seeking additional resources to increase their competences for working in inclusive conditions, they still do not use resources available to them, for example, in their own school (Pekeberg, 2012).

The European Agency for the Development of Education for Pupils and Students with Special Educational Needs (according to the Guidelines for Working with Pupils with Disabilities, Ministry of Science and Education, - MZO Smjernice za rad s učenicima s teškoćama, 2021, p. 7) determines the profile of inclusive teachers/teachers and educational associates of schools with four basic areas of competence, one of which relates to cooperation with others.

Todd (2007) pointed out that cooperation in an inclusive school took place through three domains: the inclusion and participation of children with developmental disabilities in a regular school, the cooperation

of parents with the school and the school's professional team, and cooperation between experts who participate in inclusive education. Zuckerman (2016) emphasized that teachers who worked in inclusive education were expected, among other things, to cooperate well with educational associates and to be open to teamwork. Igrić et al. (2004), on the other hand, pointed out that teachers needed support from educational associates in expanding the necessary knowledge and skills when working with students with disabilities, and that the professional training and education that the professional team could provide was important. In order for teachers to achieve their task in the educational process under conditions of inclusion, they need support: organizational - which refers to the number of students in the class, helpers or teaching assistants; material - means and equipment, and finally professional support - creation, implementation and evaluation of individualized programs (Ivančić, 2012). The factor that most affects the low quality of inclusion in our schools, according to teachers' assessments, is precisely the lack of professional support for teachers (Bouillet, 2013).

More recent research (Özokcu, 2018; Narkun & Smogorzewska, 2019; Savolainen & Malinen, 2020) has dealt with the connection between self-efficacy and attitudes towards inclusive education. The results of these studies show that there is a significant connection between teacher self-efficacy and attitudes towards inclusive education, and that self-efficacy, and especially self-efficacy for cooperation, is a significant factor in explaining these attitudes.

The quality of an inclusive school implies, in addition to good material and organizational resources, professional resources for inclusive activities (Ivančić & Stančić, 2013). In addition to the expertise of the teachers for the implementation of inclusive education, these resources include professional support, both internal, from educational associates, and external involving experts who provide inclusive support to the school. The lack of these resources or cooperation among experts can affect the impossibility or insufficient quality of strategies and activities aimed at meeting the needs of all students.

Mere changes in legislation and regulations are not enough to implement quality inclusion. The development of an inclusive society requires, first of all, a change in the way of thinking, the development of skills and means of educational assessment, redefining the role of teachers and other experts as well as the role of existing special institutions, ensuring professional support for teachers through the introduction of changes in the system of

initial and lifelong education of teachers, principals and other employees, so that the new teacher can contribute to the process of inclusion, changes in the school system that will contribute to the process of inclusion, considering the necessary flexibility, but also ensuring the support of professional services (Bratković, 2004; Ivančić & Stančić, 2015; Marković, 2022).

Objective and research hypothesis

Based on the above, the aim of the research was to identify the differences in separate components of self-assessed self-efficacy for teacher cooperation, taking into consideration whether educational associates provide them with adequate support in working with students with disabilities or not.

Hypothesis H1 was put forward: Statistically significant differences exist in separate components of self-assessed self-efficacy for cooperation between teachers, taking into consideration whether educational associates provide them with adequate support in working with students with disabilities or not.

Methodology

Sample of examinees

The sample consists of 357 classroom and subject teachers of both sexes, in the Istria region, Croatia.

The sample of examinees consists of an expected larger number of female teachers (89.6 %) compared to male teachers (10.4 %). The largest number of teachers in the sample is between the ages of 51 and 65 (33.9 %), slightly less between the ages of 41 and 50 (31.9 %), 23 % of examinees are between the ages of 31 and 40, and the smallest number is from 20 to 30 years old (11.2 %). Almost 2/3 of teachers are aged 41 and older.

The largest number of teachers from the sample had 21 or more years of work experience (44.5 %), and the least 10 or less years of work experience in educational institutions (28 %). The largest number of teachers had 10 or less years of work experience in inclusive classes (60.8 %). Only 16.5 % of the respondents had 21 or more years of work experience in inclusive classes.

Regarding their job position, the sample of examinees consists of 42.3 % of teachers working as classroom teachers, while 57.7 % of examinees working as subject teachers.

It was shown that the largest number of teachers from the sample, 98.6 % of them, worked in schools where a educational associate pedagogue

was employed, while 84.9 % of teachers worked in schools where a educational associate psychologist was employed. A significantly smaller number of teachers were employed in schools where an educational rehabilitator (26.4 %) and a speech therapist (22.7 %) worked, while the smallest number of teachers stated that they had the opportunity to receive the support of a social pedagogue - only 9 of them (8 %).

More than half of the of examinees estimated that educational associates did not provide adequate support in working with students with disabilities (52.94 %), and slightly fewer examinees estimated that educational associates provided adequate support in working with students with disabilities (47.06 %).

Variables

For the purposes of this research, the Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for Inclusive Practice was constructed and used. After pilot pretesting, it was determined that the questionnaire had good measurement characteristics (validity was determined by factor analysis under the component model, reliability was in the range from .297 to .712). The questionnaire consists of two parts.

The first, general part consists of 24 variables that collect data on sociodemographic factors that can influence the teacher's self-assessed self-efficacy: gender, age, years of work experience in the field of education, years of work experience in inclusive classes, teacher's job position, number of students per day he/she teaches, characteristics of the school where he/she is employed, personal experiences with children with disabilities and people with disabilities, assessment of their own qualifications for inclusive practices, and satisfaction with the professional support in inclusive conditions.

The second part refers to teacher's self-assessment of self-efficacy for inclusive practice and consists of four hypothetical areas of assessment: self-efficacy for inclusive teaching, self-efficacy for cooperation, self-efficacy for behavior management, and self-efficacy for inclusive school climate.

For the self-assessment of self-efficacy for cooperation, a third subscale related to self-efficacy for cooperation was observed on this occasion, for which the following variables were statistically significant after the pilot study:

28. I can influence the decisions made at school.

29. I can freely express my view on topics that are important to the school.

30. I have influence over the class size in my school.

36. I can contribute to overcoming the impact of bad conditions in the community on students.

37. I can influence whether students write homework.

40. They can influence the involvement of organizations that promote inclusive education in the work of the school (for example, the Down Sy Center, the Association "Hoću-mogu" and others).

41. They can influence the involvement of universities and colleges in the work of the school.

45. I can help other teachers improve their skills in teaching differently abled students.

46. I can influence better cooperation between teachers and the administration so that the school functions more efficiently.

47. They can influence the prevention of early school leaving.

48. I can reduce the frequency of unjustified absence of students from school.

The measurement characteristics of the observed self-efficacy subscale for cooperation are very good (α = .881, rtt =.824, $\lambda 6$ =.899, hom1 =.402).

Examinees could express their own perception of self-efficacy by agreeing or disagreeing with assertions from the questionnaire on a five-point Likert-type scale ("completely disagree", "somewhat disagree", "can't decide", "somewhat agree" and "completely agree").

Data processing methods

In addition to the calculation of basic statistical parameters, in data processing, multivariate analysis of variance, t-test and discrimination analysis were used to calculate the differences between the observed groups. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Research method

The research was conducted at the end of 2021. The design of the research was approved by the Committee for Ethical Research Evaluation of the Juraj Dobrila University in Pula, Croatia before the implementation. Prior to conducting the research, the respondents were informed about the aim and purpose of the research and were offered informed consent. At any time, any subject could withdraw from the study without any consequences. Data were collected through the online version of the Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for Inclusive Practice, which s tried to avoid suggestibility and the tendency to give socially desirable answers as much as possible.

Results and discussion

Multivariate analysis of variance was used to establish whether there are manifest differences between teachers regarding the support for working with students with disabilities that they receive from professional associates, and in relation to the combination of variables of the subscale for cooperation of Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for Inclusive Practice. The results indicate the existence of statistically significant differences in the area of self-efficacy for cooperation between the two mentioned taxonomic groups of teachers, Λ=.943, F (11, 345) = 1.900, p= .038.

T-test for independent samples was used to determine the differences on each individual variable of the subscale of self-efficacy for cooperation between teachers who did not receive adequate support for working with students with disabilities from educational associates, and those who received such support. The results are visible in Table 1 and show he existence of statistically significant differences in 3 of the 11 variables of this subscale.

Table 1 Basic statistical values and T-test results

Variable	NO		YES		Min		Max		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD						
28. I can influence the decisions made at school.	3.09	1.062	3.29	.999	1	5	1	5	-1.799	.073
29. I can freely express my view on topics that are important to the school.	3.91	1.038	4.18	.943	1	5	1	5	-2.510	.013*
30. I have influence over the class size in my school.	1.88	1.215	2.26	1.371	1	5	1	5	-2.721	.007*
36. I can contribute to overcoming the impact of bad conditions in the community on students.	3.53	0.841	3.50	0.954	1	5	1	5	.306	.760
37. I can influence whether students write homework.	3.56	1,028	3.57	1.113	1	5	1	5	-.140	.889

40. They can influence the involvement of organizations that promote inclusive education in the work of the school (for example, the Down Sy Center, the Association "Hoću-mogu" and others).	2.55	1.103	2.74	1.122	1	5	1	5	-1.637	.102
41. They can influence the involvement of universities and colleges in the work of the school.	2.37	1.130	2.54	1.157	1	5	1	5	-1.320	.188
45. I can help other teachers improve their skills in teaching differently abled students.	3.40	1,055	3.53	1.038	1	5	1	5	-1.150	.251
46. I can influence better cooperation between teachers and the administration so that the school functions more efficiently.	3.13	1.138	3.44	1.114	1	5	1	5	-2.535	.012*
47. They can influence the prevention of early school leaving.	3.04	1.177	3.21	1.131	1	5	1	5	-1.397	.163
48. I can reduce the frequency of unjustified absence of students from school.	3.01	1.122	3.10	1.192	1	5	1	5	-.782	.434

The data from Table 1 provide an insight into the fact that teachers who receive adequate support for working with students with disabilities from educational associates accomplish higher results on nearly all variables of the subscale for cooperation. These differences proved to be statistically significant in 3 out of 11 variables of this subscale. Statistically significant differences, all in favor of teachers who receive adequate support from educational associates, are present on the variables that speak of teacher self-efficacy for expressing opinions on issues that are important for the school (variable 29), for influencing the size of the class in the school (variable 30), and for influencing better cooperation between teachers and administration, so that the school functions better (variable 46).

Previous research has also highlighted the importance of cooperation between teachers and educational associates and other professionals in the school. Teamwork enables the exchange of information, ideas, and support for teachers in inclusive education (Kudek Mirošević et al., 2020).

In order to determine the latent dimensions of the differences between the observed groups, a discriminant analysis was performed. The discriminant analysis procedure makes it possible to determine the correlations of individual variables with the discriminant function, based on which the contribution of each variable to the total difference between groups can be determined. One statistically significant discriminant function was extracted (Table 2).

Table 2 Characteristic root and Wilks Lambda

Function	%var	R	Λ	χ2	df	p
1	100	.239	.943	20.55	11	.038

The canonical correlation shows a relatively good discriminating power of this function in a practical sense, R = .239, which means that the differences in self-efficacy for cooperation between groups are influenced by some other factors, which are not covered by the observed set of variables. One of these factors, possibly, is the perceived usefulness of the received support. Research conducted by Coladarci and Breton (1997) showed that teachers who felt that the support they received for working in inclusive settings from other professionals was helpful, showed a higher level of self-efficacy than teachers who had a less positive view to the benefit of the received support.

Table 3. Standardized canonical discriminant coefficient of the function (C) and the structure of the matrix (S)

Variable	C	S
28. I can influence the decisions made at school.	.002	.387
29. I can freely express my view on topics that are important to the school.	.520	.538*
30. I have influence over the class size in my school.	.679	.587*
36. I can contribute to overcoming the impact of bad conditions in the community on students.	-.576	-.066
37. I can influence whether students write homework.	-.113	.030
40. They can influence the involvement of organizations that promote inclusive education in the work of the school (for example, the Down Sy Center, the Association "Hoću-mogu" and others).	.084	.353
41. They can influence the involvement of universities and colleges in the work of the school.	-.150	.285
45. I can help other teachers improve their skills in teaching differently abled students.	-.137	.248
46. I can influence better cooperation between teachers and the administration so that the school functions more efficiently.	.627	.547*
47. They can influence the prevention of early school leaving.	.116	.301
48. I can reduce the frequency of unjustified absence of students from school.	-.264	.169

Table 4. Group centroids

Group	Function
NO	-.231
YES	.260

An insight into the structure and centroids of the groups (Tables 3 and 4) shows that teachers differ statistically significantly in variable 30 "I have an influence on the class size in my school", variable 46 "I can influence better cooperation between teachers and the administration so that the school functions more efficiently" and 29 "I can freely express my view on topics that are important to the school". In the mentioned variables, higher results, and therefore a higher level of self-efficacy for cooperation, are shown by teachers who assess that professional colleagues at school provide them with adequate support for working with students with disabilities

Conclusion and limitations

Based on the obtained results, the proposed hypothesis can be accepted. The research confirmed the existence of statistically significant differences in the separate components of self-efficacy for cooperation between teachers, taking into consideration whether educational associates provide them with adequate support in working with students with disabilities or not. The results show that differences are evident on both the manifest and latent levels. Generally speaking, the variables in which teachers who receive support from professional associates show a higher level of self-efficacy for cooperation are mostly related to administrative-organizational support and freedom of expression of opinion.

It is known that cooperation, teamwork, exchange of experience, partnership in school and positive relations among all educational subjects play a very important role in inclusive education (Mărgăriţoiu, 2010 as cited in Bouillet, 2013). However, analyzing research on the subject of cooperation in education for all, and the teacher's perception of it, one can come to the conclusion that at this moment it is necessary to better conceptualize this cooperation and its components, as well as the factors that influence it. This research confirms the aforementioned statements. Namely, cooperation should be manifested more strongly in essential issues in working with students, such as promoting inclusive education in school work, the skill of teaching students with different abilities, preventing early drop-out, and less due to administrative-organizational reasons.

Consequently, as shown by the results of previous research, supporting teachers in working with students with disabilities requires a holistic and collaborative approach, and the key elements of such an approach are the inclusive culture of the school and its employees, sufficient educational associates and didactic resources, and the possibility of permanent professional development of all stakeholders of this process (Vekić-Kljajić & Hanzec-Marković, 2023).

Limitations of the research are related to the voluntary nature of the sample of examinees. Namely, during the research, the number of teachers who refused to participate in the research, despite the received invitation, and the number who gave up while filling out the questionnaire, were not determined. Also, the data is based on self-reporting, and although an effort was made to reduce the possibility of giving socially desirable answers, there is no evidence to guarantee that all shortcomings of self-reporting have really been removed.

The contribution of this research is twofold. It consists in acquiring results that allow insight into the structure of self-assessed self-efficacy of teachers working in inclusive conditions in the area of one region in Croatia. On the other side, this work contributes to the interpretation of the possible connection between specific components of teacher self-efficacy for cooperation in inclusive conditions with factors that could influence it when it comes to the support of educational associates. The limitations of this research were certainly influenced by the voluntary nature of the sample. During the research, it was not confirmed how many teachers refused to participate in it and how many gave up while answering the questions. In addition, the data is based on self-report. The research is representative for the area of Istria region, and to reach better conclusions, it would be useful to conduct it in the context of the entire Republic of Croatia, as well as to compare the self-efficacy for the cooperation of Croatian teachers with that of teachers in other countries.

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