

A Comprehensive Review of the Concept, Influencing Factors, and Strategies for Enhancing Teacher Efficacy in Inclusive Education

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Abstract: The rapid global development of inclusive education has drawn substantial academic interest, yet issues such as substandard quality and "merely sitting in regular classes" within classrooms persist. The success of educational practice is crucial in any teaching context, particularly within inclusive education. To elevate the quality of inclusive education, it is essential to first focus on improving the quality of inclusive teaching practices, and the cornerstone of this improvement is enhancing teacher efficacy in inclusive education. This review addresses three critical questions: "What defines teacher efficacy in inclusive education?", "What factors affect this efficacy?", and "How can teacher efficacy in inclusive education be improved?". By exploring these dimensions—definition, influencing factors, and improvement strategies—this study aims to provide both theoretical insights and practical guidance for teachers seeking to implement effective inclusive education.

Keywords: Learning in Regular Classroom; Inclusive Education; Teachers for Inclusive Education; Teacher Efficacy; Efficacy in Inclusive Education

1. Introduction

Inclusive education entails meeting the needs of all children, with every mainstream school obligated to enroll all children in its service area and provide the necessary conditions for each child to receive tailored education ^[1]. In recent years, an increasing number of countries have emphasized the rights of children with special needs and actively promoted the development of inclusive education. The international evolution of inclusive education began in the late 1950s and has passed through stages such as the "normalization"

movement, mainstreaming, and integrated education. Key international documents like the Salamanca Statement, the Dakar Framework for Action, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities have provided significant support for advancing inclusive education. Presently, developed countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand have conducted extensive theoretical research, practical exploration, and policy formulation in the realm of inclusive education. In China, the development of inclusive education began in the mid-1980s, with the "learning in regular classroom" experiment becoming synonymous with Chinese inclusive education. The term "learning in regular classroom" was formally proposed in the 1987 draft of the Teaching Plan for Full-time Mental Retardation Schools (Classes). By the time of the "14th Five-Year" Special Education Development and Enhancement Plan in 2022, promoting inclusive education had been explicitly highlighted as one of the fundamental pathways for the development of special education in the new era. This exemplifies the nation's profound commitment to inclusive education. Despite starting comparatively later in China, with concerted efforts from both governmental and societal levels, inclusive education has shown a rapid developmental trajectory.

While countries and regions worldwide actively promote the advancement of inclusive education, they still face numerous challenges in practical implementation, such as issues related to the quality of inclusive education and the prevalence of the "merely sitting in regular classes". Educational practice stands as a pivotal factor in educational outcomes, a principle that applies equally in the realm of inclusive education. Teachers play a crucial role in shaping the quality of inclusive

classrooms through the development, implementation, and evaluation of teaching plans. Thus, enhancing the quality of inclusive education primarily requires a focus on elevating the quality of inclusive teaching practices. Existing research indicates that various factors influence inclusive teaching practices, including teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education and their level of attention to inclusive classroom dynamics. Notably, research consistently underscores the significant impact of teacher efficacy in inclusive education on the overall quality of inclusive education [2]. Building upon these insights, this study aims to delve into existing research, conducting a thorough analysis of teacher efficacy in inclusive education to elucidate the essence of it, investigate the factors influencing it, and address how to enhance it. Specifically, this paper will analyze and evaluate teacher efficacy in inclusive education from three dimensions: definition, influencing factors, and improvement strategies. The aim is to provide theoretical references and practical guidance for teachers engaged in the implementation of inclusive education.

2. Comprehensive Review of Teacher Efficacy in Inclusive Education

2.1 Introduction of Teacher Efficacy in Inclusive Teaching

The concept of teacher efficacy among teachers finds its roots in Bandura's social cognitive theory. Bandura's framework divides self-efficacy into four core domains: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological states. When applied to the field of education, Tschannen-Moran and others suggest that teacher efficacy revolves around the belief that teachers possess the competence to effectively plan and execute instructional tasks within specific contexts [3]. Expanding on this notion, Ashton indicates that teacher efficacy encompasses teachers' confidence in their capacity to not only fulfill their teaching responsibilities but also impact their students' academic achievements [4]. This diverse understanding of teacher efficacy has given rise to various research perspectives. As early as the 1990s, a handful of international researchers touched upon teacher efficacy in the realm of inclusive education [5,6]. By

approximately 2008, an increasing number of academics started directing their attention to studies pertaining to teacher efficacy within the inclusive education landscape. Notably, over the past five years, there has been a noticeable surge in both local and global research focusing on teacher efficacy in inclusive education. As scholarship delves deeper into this area, there is a notable trend towards quantifying teacher efficacy, prompting the development of diverse measurement tools to evaluate it. This trend extends to the inclusive education domain as well. In addition to utilizing standard teacher self-efficacy assessments, researchers have tailored tools to specifically gauge teacher efficacy within inclusive education, such as the esteemed Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP) scale [7]. In summary, international interest in teacher efficacy within the realm of inclusive education emerged early on and has progressively gained more scholarly attention in recent years.

2.2 Pertinent Studies on the Teacher Efficacy in Inclusive Education

In the current research landscape, a clear and authoritative definition of teachers' implementation of teaching efficacy in inclusive education has yet to be established. While Sharma, the Australian scholar who developed the TEIP scale, did not explicitly put forth a definition of teacher efficacy in inclusive education, he expanded the concept of teachers' general efficacy to encompass their efficacy within the context of inclusive education [8]. Moreover, many scholars have interpreted this concept based on their own research perspectives, each emphasizing different aspects. Zan emphasized the correlation between teachers' self-efficacy and problem-solving abilities, defining it as teachers' self-judgment, beliefs, and feelings regarding engaging in inclusive education. He suggested that teachers' self-efficacy profoundly influences problem-solving capabilities, behavioral performance in inclusive education, and effectiveness [9]. Xiong focused on the multifaceted impact of teaching efficacy, defining inclusive education efficacy as teachers' perception and belief in their ability to effectively complete teaching tasks and achieve instructional objectives. She underscored the influence of teaching efficacy

on teachers' physical and mental well-being, professional commitment, work motivation, and educational practices^[10]. Li contended that inclusive education efficacy involves successfully addressing the needs of both typical and special education students, defining it as teachers' subjective conjecture regarding their success in balancing the education of typical and special needs students within inclusive education^[11]. Zhang and Shang emphasized the reflection of teachers' confidence levels in inclusive education, defining inclusive education efficacy as teachers' belief and feelings regarding their capability to effectively implement inclusive education, reflecting teachers' confidence in teaching special needs children and subsequently affecting their actual teaching behavior^[8,12]. Li suggested that inclusive education efficacy refers to teachers' perception and belief in their capability to carry out inclusive education work, placing emphasis on specific teaching abilities within inclusive education^[13]. Forlin similarly underscored the crucial role of confidence in the success of inclusive education^[14]. According to Forlin, teachers' confidence in their knowledge, skills, and abilities is crucial when implementing inclusive education, emphasizing the necessity of confidence in knowledge, skills, and abilities for successfully implementing inclusive education.

In summary, these viewpoints collectively underscore the pivotal role of teacher efficacy in inclusive education practices. The beliefs, perceptions, and emotional states of teachers deeply influence their problem-solving abilities, actual behavioral manifestations, and overall educational outcomes. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more inclined to employ effective teaching strategies and maintain a positive attitude towards students with special needs, thereby increasing their likelihood of achieving success. In contrast, teachers with low teacher efficacy in inclusive education often exhibit passive or indifferent attitudes throughout the teaching process. This highlights the vital role of self-efficacy in inspiring proactive teacher behavior and fostering positive educational outcomes. Therefore, nurturing and enhancing teachers' efficacy in inclusive education is likely to facilitate more effective inclusive educational practices.

3. A Review of Factors Influencing Teacher Efficacy in Inclusive Education Practices

Based on a synthesis, organization, and analysis of existing research, the following five influencing factors are summarized: demographic variables, teachers' intrinsic traits, pre-service teacher education and in-service professional learning, experience in interacting with people with disabilities, and school climate.

3.1 Demographic Variables

From the existing research, five demographic variables are summarized as follows: familiarity with special education laws and regulations, national and regional backgrounds, teaching experience, age, and gender.

3.1.1 Familiarity with special education laws and regulations

Currently, researchers from multiple countries unanimously acknowledge that familiarity with special education laws and regulations is a key factor influencing teacher efficacy in inclusive education. Ahsan et al, and others have pointed out that understanding local legislation regarding individuals with disabilities is one of the foremost influential factors affecting efficacy in inclusive education practices^[15]. In China, studies by Zan, Zhao, and Li also indicate that this factor has a certain impact on the efficacy of mainstream teachers in inclusive education^[9,13,16]. Similar conclusions have been validated by researchers in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and other countries^[17,18].

3.1.2 National and Regional Backgrounds

The perceived impact on teacher efficacy in inclusive education varies significantly across different countries and regions. For instance, studies in Canada and Austria indicate that teachers generally exhibit a higher sense of efficacy in inclusive education practices^[19,20]. In China, research reveals that teachers' efficacy in inclusive education is notably higher in the northern and economically developed coastal regions compared to the western and northwestern areas, where studies remain relatively sparse. Historically, some countries have pioneered inclusive education, establishing a coherent and standardized system from governmental funding and policy implementation to specific classroom design and execution. For example, teachers in New Zealand maintain a predominantly positive

attitude toward inclusive education, largely due to strong governmental support and the effective implementation of inclusive initiatives [21]. In contrast, China's journey in inclusive education began somewhat later, with the integration experiment starting in the 1980s. Although there has been a growing emphasis on inclusive education across various regions, challenges related to unbalanced and insufficient development persist. Consequently, disparities in teacher efficacy in inclusive education are evident across different regions.

3.1.3 Educational stages

The efficacy of teachers in inclusive education is influenced by different educational stages. Existing research indicates that, generally, teachers in kindergarten and primary education exhibit a higher sense of efficacy in inclusive practices compared to their secondary school counterparts. Ekins et al. found that in the United Kingdom, in-service teachers who instruct younger students report higher efficacy in inclusive education than those teaching older students [18]. Similarly, San Martin and colleagues have reported lower self-efficacy scores among secondary school teachers [22]. In China, researchers have drawn similar conclusions. Xiong discovered that primary school teachers possess lower self-efficacy in inclusive teaching than kindergarten teachers [10]. Zhang's study highlights that kindergarten teachers exhibit the highest levels of efficacy in implementing inclusive education, whereas efficacy levels among primary and middle school teachers are comparatively lower [8].

Scholars attribute this phenomenon to several factors: First, as educational stages progress, there is a greater emphasis on academic achievement, with academic performance increasingly viewed as a key measure of teaching success. Consequently, teachers may overlook individual student differences, tending toward uniform teaching methods. In such cases, teachers' confidence in implementing inclusive education significantly diminishes, coupled with heightened pressure. Second, from a class size perspective, preschool classes have relatively fewer students, allowing teachers to dedicate more attention to each child, which facilitates the implementation of inclusive education. Third, during the secondary education phase, students enter adolescence, characterized by emotional and behavioral fluctuations, leading to

increased management difficulties compared to primary and preschool stages. This dynamic may further contribute to diminished teacher efficacy in inclusive education.

3.1.4 Age

Age plays a significant role in shaping teacher efficacy in inclusive education. Research conducted by Ekins et al. and Subban et al. in the United Kingdom and Australia reveals that older in-service teachers tend to exhibit higher self-efficacy in inclusive practices [18,23]. Zhang's research also indicates that teachers with over 21 years of experience demonstrate the highest levels of efficacy when implementing inclusive education [8]. This phenomenon can largely be attributed to the extensive teaching tenure of older teachers, who have amassed a wealth of experience and have become adept in various areas, thereby equipping them to effectively address new challenges and circumstances in the teaching process, ultimately resulting in greater success in inclusive educational practices.

3.1.5 Gender

Existing studies have identified gender as one of the factors influencing teachers' efficacy in inclusive education. However, findings regarding the impact of gender in this context are somewhat inconsistent. Some researchers argue that female teachers exhibit higher self-efficacy in inclusive education compared to their male counterparts [22,24,25]. Conversely, other studies suggest that male teachers may outperform female teachers in terms of efficacy in inclusive practices [26,27]. This disparity may be influenced by factors such as the selection of research subjects and regional differences, among others. Furthermore, some studies have found that the influence of gender on efficacy in inclusive education is not particularly significant. Thus, future research could delve deeper into the relationship between gender variables and efficacy in inclusive education, aiming for a more comprehensive understanding of this influencing factor.

3.2 Teachers' Intrinsic Traits

The intrinsic traits of teachers have a significant impact on their sense of efficacy in inclusive education.

3.2.1 Attitude towards efficacy in inclusive education

Numerous studies indicate a positive

correlation between teacher efficacy in inclusive education and their attitudes toward inclusive practices [2]. Miesera and Gebhardt highlighted that a positive attitude towards inclusive education is one of the most crucial factors in predicting the teacher efficacy of pre-service and in-service teachers in Canada and Germany [19]. Conclusions drawn by Zhang affirm a significant positive correlation between teachers' implementation of inclusive education efficacy and their attitudes towards inclusive education [8]. This suggests that when teachers hold a more positive attitude towards inclusive education, they exhibit greater confidence in all aspects of implementing inclusive practices, consequently leading to an enhanced sense of efficacy in inclusive education. Conversely, any initial negative or resistant attitudes towards inclusive education may impede the development of efficacy in inclusive practices.

3.2.2 Personal qualities of teachers

Personal qualities such as motivation, interest, sense of responsibility, willingness to share experiences, and a positive attitude also influence teacher efficacy in inclusive education. For instance, research by Schwab and colleagues in Germany and Austria found that teachers with a strong interest in inclusive education exhibit higher levels of efficacy in inclusive practices [20]. Buttner et al. stated that qualities like a sense of responsibility, humility, and a willingness to actively share experiences and ideas can predict the teacher efficacy of primary school teachers in the Netherlands when dealing with students facing emotional and behavioral challenges [28]. It is evident that teachers' intrinsic qualities assist in the practical implementation of inclusive teaching, aiding them in overcoming challenges and strengthening their teacher efficacy.

3.3 Pre-Service Teacher Education and In-Service Professional Learning

Both pre-service training and in-service professional learning that focus on special education can enhance teacher efficacy in inclusive education. Taliaferro, Hammond, and Wyant discovered that pre-service teachers who underwent short-term training in disability awareness experienced a significant boost in their efficacy for inclusive teaching [29]. Yada et al. found that pre-service teachers in Finland demonstrated elevated efficacy in inclusive

teaching after participating in a greater number of courses on inclusive education, including practical internships [30]. Furthermore, research by Chinese scholars Zhao, Li, and Zhang indicates that teachers who have received training in special education also show a measurable improvement in their efficacy for inclusive education [8,13,16].

By providing teachers with specialized coursework and practical training in special and inclusive education, they can accumulate both theoretical knowledge and practical experience. This reservoir of knowledge and experience serves as a framework and template for teachers engaging in inclusive education, thereby bolstering their confidence in their teaching capabilities. Conversely, a lack of relevant knowledge and insufficient understanding of the field of inclusive education may exacerbate teachers' feelings of apprehension and resistance, ultimately leading to a diminished sense of efficacy in their teaching endeavors.

3.4 Experiences with Special Populations

Interactions and experiences with special populations, whether through family, friends, or professional environments, significantly influence teacher efficacy in inclusive teaching. Research indicates that the higher the level of interaction with individuals with disabilities, the stronger teachers' self-efficacy in inclusive classrooms becomes. For instance, Specht et al. underscored that experiences working alongside individuals with disabilities can enhance teachers' scores across various dimensions of the Teacher Efficacy in Inclusive Practices (TEIP) scale [25]. Studies conducted by Chinese researchers Chen, Zhang, Li, and Zhao reveal that experiences with special populations exert a significant influence on teachers' efficacy in inclusive education [8,13,16,31].

Engagement with individuals with disabilities fosters teachers' empathy and enhances their sense of resonance, aligning with Bandura's concept of vicarious experiences within the structure of self-efficacy. Teachers with such relevant experiences are more adept at perspective-taking, allowing them to patiently comprehend the strengths and challenges of special populations. This understanding enables them to better meet the individual needs of their students, ultimately enhancing

their sense of efficacy in teaching.

4. Overview of Measures to Enhance Teachers' Efficacy in Inclusive Education

By analyzing and summarizing the measures proposed by various scholars to enhance teachers' efficacy in inclusive education, this paper has distilled the relatively unified perspectives in this field.

4.1 Strengthening the Promotion and Popularization of Inclusive Education Philosophy

In their research, scholars such as Chen and Zhang highlighted the importance of enhancing the promotion of inclusive education philosophy [8, 31]. They collectively emphasized the following points: Firstly, efforts to disseminate this concept should be amplified. Given the general unfamiliarity with inclusive education, it is recommended that the government and relevant educational authorities utilize online platforms and modern technological tools to launch widespread campaigns, thereby reducing the public's unfamiliarity and resistance to inclusive education. Secondly, professional workshops and charitable lectures should be organized, such as inviting experts into schools to deliver public lectures on the theme of "Embracing Inclusive Education". Additionally, the distribution of books or pamphlets is encouraged to aid teachers in understanding the theoretical foundations of inclusive education and to enhance their cognitive grasp of the subject. Furthermore, regular seminars and observation activities should be arranged. Teachers should be encouraged to participate in workshops on inclusive education, observe exemplary lessons, and engage in case studies to improve their confidence and competence in implementing inclusive education. Lastly, the utilization of multimedia tools should be stressed, advocating the use of bulletin boards, posters, school journals, and other media channels to create dedicated sections on inclusive education. This approach would foster a deeper understanding among teachers and students and promote a more welcoming and effective adoption of inclusive education practices among educators.

Overall, these recommendations offer practical solutions to address the unfamiliarity and cognitive barriers to inclusive education within

China's educational system, thereby contributing to improving the implementation effectiveness of inclusive education.

4.2 Enhancing the Advocacy and Establishment of Inclusive Education Laws and Regulations

Abundant research underscores that teachers' understanding of special education and inclusive education laws and regulations is a significant factor influencing their sense of efficacy in inclusive education. Therefore, many researchers have included recommendations regarding the advocacy and establishment of relevant laws and regulations when enhancing teachers' efficacy in inclusive education, primarily focusing on the following aspects: Firstly, in the context of China, there is an urgent need for the enactment of specialized legislation concerning special education, rather than it being contingent upon other laws. This legislation would standardize and safeguard various matters within special education and inclusive education to support the effective implementation of inclusive educational practices. Secondly, it is essential to intensify the promotion of relevant laws and regulations to help teachers understand their responsibilities and obligations, thus enhancing their awareness of the rights of children with special needs. Furthermore, some scholars suggest encouraging teachers to participate in the development and reform of special education laws, facilitating a better understanding and implementation of relevant policies.

Taken together, these viewpoints underscore the critical role of legal frameworks in promoting inclusive education and put forward a series of practical recommendations to strengthen the regulation and advocacy of laws and regulations concerning special education and inclusive education. These measures are poised to enhance teacher efficacy in inclusive education and foster the high-quality development of inclusive education.

4.3 Elevating Teachers' Proficiency in Knowledge and Skills

Numerous studies have indicated that a lack of specialized knowledge and skills in inclusive education and special education poses a significant challenge for regular teachers and impacts their confidence in implementing

inclusive education, constituting a substantial hindrance to their teaching work. Therefore, scholars have outlined the following requirements for enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills: On one hand, there is an emphasis on conducting training based on practical situations. For example, inviting experienced principals, deans, and exemplary teachers to visit frontline settings for observation and teaching enables the identification of specific issues in practice. Subsequently, tailored instruction can be provided on commonly used teaching strategies in special education and inclusive education, methods for adjusting curricula, and skills related to managing inclusive education classrooms. On the other hand, there should be a balanced focus on both pre-service and in-service training. Not only should theoretical knowledge be emphasized, but practical applications as well. Training content should encompass addressing emotional, behavioral, and learning issues of special children, engaging in multi-level teaching activities, communication with parents, and other practical concerns.

In conclusion, these suggestions comprehensively cover various facets of knowledge and skill development, encompassing both theoretical learning and practical application. However, scholars tend to place greater emphasis on the cultivation of practical skills, making it imperative for the future research agenda to focus on how to construct a comprehensive theoretical knowledge framework.

5. Recommendations

The inevitable trend of inclusive education's advancement demands meticulous attention. Drawing from existing research, this study has provided a comprehensive overview of the definition, influencing factors, and improvement strategies related to teacher efficacy in inclusive education. The aim is to offer insights for elevating the quality of inclusive education. Through analysis, comparison, and synthesis, this study suggests that future research should focus on the following aspects.

5.1 Urgent Necessity for Unified and Well-Defined Conceptual Definitions

Currently, the concept of teacher efficacy in inclusive education lacks authoritative

delineation, resulting in various interpretations within this field. While these viewpoints and interpretations share some commonalities, each interpretation emphasizes different aspects, potentially leading to concept confusion and unstable research outcomes. Therefore, in future studies, it is crucial to clearly define the concept of teacher efficacy in inclusive education. Researchers should strive to ensure a shared, distinct understanding of key concepts to promote the scientific development of the discipline and sustainable knowledge progression.

5.2 Inclusion of Multiple Variables for Relational Exploration

While many scholars have incorporated attitudes towards inclusive education as a variable to investigate the relationship between teacher efficacy in inclusive education and attitudes, relatively fewer studies have explored the relationship between teacher efficacy in inclusive education and other variables. Hence, particularly in China, researchers should consider integrating diverse relevant variables to further elucidate the relationship between teacher efficacy in inclusive education and these variables. This not only aids in clarifying measures to enhance efficacy but also facilitates the exploration of the relationship between teacher efficacy in inclusive education and its influencing factors. For instance, divergent conclusions exist in studies regarding the influence of gender on teacher efficacy in inclusive education, suggesting the potential presence of other moderating factors warranting further investigation.

5.3 Research Tailored to Local Contexts

In current studies, most researchers employ tools such as the Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices scale (TEIP) and the Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale (TSES) to measure teacher efficacy in inclusive education. While some scholars directly translate and adopt these tools, others use revised versions. The structures of such scales are defined from a Western perspective and may not necessarily be applicable to China and non-Western countries due to cultural differences, policy backgrounds, etc. Therefore, many studies lack effective localized scales for measuring teacher efficacy in inclusive education. In future

research, scholars should prioritize localized research design to enhance the appropriateness and specificity of their studies.

5.4 Teacher Efficacy Encompassing All Students

Of note is that current research primarily focuses on evaluating teachers' efficacy towards students with special needs in inclusive education. However, overly concentrating on special needs students in educational practice while neglecting the needs of general students may give rise to new issues of educational inequality. Therefore, in inclusive education, equal emphasis should be placed on teaching and managing both special needs and general students. Future research should emphasize exploring teacher efficacy in simultaneously catering to the needs of both special needs and general students in the classroom to establish a more comprehensive, balanced model of inclusive educational practice.

6. Conclusions

This study, through an analysis and synthesis of existing literature, delves into the definition, influencing factors, and improvement strategies regarding teachers' efficacy in inclusive education. Findings underscore the pivotal role of teachers' efficacy in inclusive education on the quality of its implementation. Factors influencing teachers' efficacy in inclusive education encompass teachers' inherent traits, pre-service and in-service training experiences, interactions with individuals with special needs, school climate, and understanding of legal regulations, among others. Moreover, the study reveals effective strategies for elevating teachers' efficacy in inclusive education, such as promoting the concept of inclusive education, enhancing legal framework development, and elevating teachers' professional knowledge and skills. Nevertheless, the study is not without limitations. Primarily, the concept of teachers' efficacy in inclusive education lacks a unified definition, leading to divergent interpretations across studies that could potentially impact the stability of research outcomes. Secondly, many studies focus solely on specific national or regional contexts, lacking comparative cross-cultural research. Additionally, there is a notable dearth of attention given to the efficacy

of general students in inclusive education, warranting a more comprehensive exploration of the impact of inclusive education on all students. Researchers should concentrate on establishing a unified conceptual framework, incorporating a broader range of variables for investigation, especially within a localized context. Additionally, the enhancement of teachers' efficacy should not solely cater to students with special needs but also encompass general students, aiming to achieve comprehensiveness and equity in inclusive educational practices.

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