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Early intervention practitioners' self-efficacy: a measure and its applications

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Abstract

Teacher efficacy is linked to student achievement and classroom practices in general and special education, but has not been explored in early intervention (EI). Based upon the work of Gibson and Dembo [Gibson, S., & Dembo, M. H. (1984). Teacher efficacy: A contrast validation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76(4) 569–582], a 15-item early interventionist self-efficacy scale (EISES) was developed for use in understanding child and program outcomes, as well as for use in evaluating interventionist training and practices. Analysis of the internal consistency reliability of the scale was adequate. Factor analysis indicated a personal self-efficacy component (internal consistency reliability was good) and a general self-efficacy component (internal consistency reliability was poor). This two-component solution explained 41% of the variance. Further analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between EI practitioners' overall self-efficacy with years of intervention experience. There was also a significant positive correlation between personal self-efficacy and years of experience in early intervention. Implications for the application of the EISES are discussed in terms of the relationships between provider beliefs, implementation of practices, child and family outcomes, as well as effective components of early intervention personnel preparation programs.

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1. Introduction

According to Woolfolk and Hoy (1990), teacher self-efficacy, or teachers' beliefs in their ability to produce positive effects on student learning, is an important construct that consistently relates to teaching

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behaviors and student outcomes. In the past 25 years, studies have indicated that teacher self-efficacy is related to K-12 student achievement (Armor et al., 1976; Ashton & Webb, 1986; Berman, McLaughlin, Bass, Pauly, & Zellman, 1977; Brookover et al., 1978; Ross, 1992), a willingness to work with students who have disabilities (Soodak & Podell, 1993), receptivity to new teaching practices (Allinder, 1994; Guskey, 1988), supervisor ratings of teaching effectiveness (Riggs & Enochs, 1990), willingness to collaborate (Morrison, Wakefield, Walker, & Solberg, 1994; Raudenbush, Rowan, & Cheong, 1992), and job commitment (Coladarci, 1992). In addition, teacher efficacy has been found to be the most powerful variable in prediction of the success of program implementation (Berman et al., 1977). In terms of its malleability, improvements in teacher self-efficacy have been reported as the result of workshops, mentoring, practica, mastery experiences, networking, and administrative support (Cannon, 1999; Huinker & Madison, 1997; Mulholland & Wallace, 2001; Ramey-Gassert, 1996; Zuckerman, 1999). In summary, Ross, Cousins, and Gadalla (1996) suggest that teacher self-efficacy is one of the few teacher attributes that reliably predict teacher practices as well as student outcomes, and importantly, this construct seems amenable to training, experience, and support.

In the present investigation, we draw upon this substantial empirical history to examine the self-efficacy of early intervention (EI) practitioners. As a group, early interventionists have responsibility for promoting learning and optimal developmental outcomes for young children who are at-risk for compromised developmental outcomes for various reasons including poverty, neglect, abuse, health, and disability. Our focus in this investigation is on a subgroup of early intervention practitioners who serve children in the birth to 3 age range with disabilities. Those who serve this population are from multiple disciplines (e.g., speech-language pathology, occupational or physical therapy, early childhood special education, child development, nursing, and so on). To date, little research has focused on self-efficacy beliefs of this diverse population. Given the established importance of teacher self-efficacy to children's learning outcomes, it would seem quite useful to gain an understanding of the self-efficacy beliefs of early interventionists. This population of "teachers" face significant challenges in providing services to their young population; an understanding of their sense of efficacy as early interventionists will contribute to our increasing understanding of factors that may influence the effectiveness of early intervention efforts.

1.1. Teaching efficacy: meaning and theoretical background

One of the earliest teacher efficacy studies was conducted by the RAND organization (Armor et al., 1976; Berman et al., 1977) in an evaluation of a reading program in elementary schools. This study used a two-item teacher efficacy measure and the items included (a) "When it comes right down to it, a teacher really cannot do much because most of a student's motivation and performance depends on his or her home environment" and (b) "If I try really hard, I can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated students." The first question was thought to tap into a general sense of teaching efficacy, which focused upon the role of environmental and demographic factors that can negatively impact a student's performance in school. The second question was focused upon a teacher's confidence in his/her personal abilities, training, and experience to overcome external obstacles in order to boost student achievement (i.e., personal teaching efficacy). According to these researchers, a combination of these two factors (general and personal) comprised an overall sense of teacher efficacy—a teacher's beliefs that he/she can have a greater impact on student outcomes than either the environment or the abilities of the student. The results of this RAND research indicated that teacher efficacy was significantly related to increases in student reading achievement as well as increases in teacher use of innovations, increases in goals met, and

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