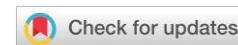




ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Perceived teacher self-efficacy for the educational inclusion of students with autism: an exploratory study of Education System in Paraguay

Autoeficacia percibida de docentes para la inclusión educativa de estudiantes con autismo: un estudio exploratorio del Sistema Educativo de Paraguay

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Abstract

Current teachers receive in their classrooms students with diverse conditions, such as autism. It is essential that they have the necessary tools to provide a quality education. Understanding how teachers perceive their own abilities to include students with autism, known as self-efficacy is crucial. The objective of this study is to analyze the perceived level of self-efficacy of teachers for teaching students with autism in inclusive classrooms in Paraguay, and to examine the reliability and validity of the translated and adapted scale developed for this purpose. Regarding methodology, this is an observational, quantitative, exploratory, cross-sectional, and non-experimental study. A total of 121 teachers from different regions of Paraguay participated. The results show that 53.4% perceive their self-efficacy as medium, while 5.9% consider it low. This reflects a lack of confidence in their abilities to teach students with autism, particularly in the use of assessment strategies and the implementation of evidence-based practices. The adapted instrument proved to be reliable for research purposes. Considering these findings, it is important to emphasize that teacher self-efficacy is vital for the effective inclusion of students with autism. It is recommended to provide teachers with additional tools and supports to strengthen their skills in including these students in inclusive settings.

Keywords: Teacher self-efficacy, autism, inclusive education, Paraguay.

Resumen

Los docentes actuales reciben en sus aulas a estudiantes con diversas condiciones, como el autismo. Es esencial que cuenten con las herramientas necesarias para ofrecer una educación de calidad. Es crucial comprender cómo perciben los docentes sus habilidades para incluir a estudiantes con autismo, un concepto conocido como autoeficacia. Este estudio establece como objetivo analizar el nivel percibido de autoeficacia de los docentes para enseñar a estudiantes con autismo en aulas inclusivas en Paraguay y examinar la fiabilidad y validez de la escalada traducida y adaptada para este propósito. En cuanto a la metodología, es una investigación observacional, cuantitativa, de alcance exploratorio, transversal y no experimental. Participaron 121 docentes de diversas regiones de Paraguay. Los resultados muestran que el 53.4% percibe su autoeficacia como media, mientras que el 5.9% la considera baja. Esto refleja una falta de confianza en sus habilidades para enseñar a estudiantes con autismo, especialmente en el uso de estrategias de evaluación y la implementación de prácticas basadas en evidencia. El instrumento adaptado demostró ser confiable para investigaciones. Teniendo en cuenta los hallazgos, es relevante indicar que la autoeficacia docente es vital para la inclusión efectiva de estudiantes con autismo. Se recomienda proporcionarles herramientas y apoyos adicionales para mejorar sus habilidades en la inclusión de estos estudiantes en aulas regulares.

Palabras clave: Autoeficacia docente, autismo, educación inclusiva, Paraguay.

Introduction

Inclusive Education has become a fundamental pillar in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals established in the 2030 Agenda, particularly SDG 4, which refers to Quality Education as a fundamental right that ensures equitable access to education for all students, regardless of their condition—whether a disability or any situation of vulnerability (UNESCO, 2015). This approach goes beyond mere physical inclusion in the classroom, requiring a comprehensive commitment from various actors and consideration of multiple aspects, including adequate infrastructure, availability of resources, professional guidance and support, and the active involvement of families, among others. Additionally, one of the central pillars underpinning the success of inclusive education is educators' ability to meet the specific needs of students who face particular challenges, such as those diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Autism is a neurobiological condition identified by the presence of social and communication deficits, including difficulties in non-verbal communication, challenges coping with change, fixed interests and repetitive behaviors, along with hypersensitivity to environmental stimuli (American Psychological Association, 2013). The prevalence of autism is not considered to be associated with racial or ethnic backgrounds or socioeconomic status (Christensen et al., 2016). In the United States, autism prevalence is estimated at 1 in every 31 children (Maener et al., 2023). At the global level, Elsabbagh et al. (2012) report that autism occurs in 62 out of every 10,000 individuals. This high prevalence means that in each grade level in the regular education system, one or more students with ASD are likely to be enrolled.

Research suggests that students with autism may face multiple challenges within the school environment. Among these are bullying (Johansson, 2014), the lack of reasonable adjustments to curricular programs that adequately address their learning needs (Larcombe et al., 2019), as well as exposure to noisy and overcrowded environments that negatively affect their emotional and behavioral regulation (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

Likewise, authors such as Larcombe et al. (2019) indicate that the lack of teacher training in effective practices for students with ASD often results in educational practices that do not foster inclusion; instead, they promote stereotypical approaches. For these reasons, it is important to explore educators' perceptions of their own abilities to meet objectives and carry out the necessary activities conducive to effective inclusion—an essential quality to ensure that students on the autism spectrum can develop adequately in the classroom.

The perception individuals have of their own abilities is known as self-efficacy, a concept developed by Bandura (1997), which refers to the belief in one's capacity to face and manage specific situations. This belief is built on several sources: mastery experiences, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and physiological or emotional states. Self-efficacy significantly influences cognitive, affective, and behavioral functioning. When this perception is low, it can lead to negative consequences for mental health, especially depressive symptoms (Román Palacios, 2020) and anxiety (Tahmassian & Jalali, 2011; Morales-Rodríguez & Pérez-Mármol, 2019).

Among teachers, this construct becomes even more relevant, as it can have a direct relationship with job satisfaction (Ortan et al., 2021; Türkoğlu et al., 2017) and an inverse relationship with burnout (Fathi et al., 2021). Specifically, among teachers working with students with autism, self-efficacy related to their ability to teach this group is significantly associated with teacher engagement and positive student outcomes (Love et al., 2020).

Educators who work with students with autism must possess a broad set of competencies that go beyond mastery of their subject area. These include a deep understanding of the academic, emotional, and behavioral needs of these students. Their responsibilities include continuous progress monitoring and developing individualized educational plans that fit the student's abilities while also meeting the standards established by the educational institution and the Ministry of Education and Sciences (MEC). These multiple demands may create a sense of overload among teachers when they perceive their

skills as not fully aligned with contextual demands or family expectations.

In Paraguay, the MEC approved in 2018 the "Guidelines for an Inclusive Educational System in Paraguay," through Ministerial Resolution No. 17267 (Ministry of Education and Sciences [MEC], 2018), intended to guide the implementation of inclusive practices in the educational system. However, this document does not clearly specify how to apply such practices to students with autism, leaving a significant gap regarding concrete guidelines and strategies tailored to this group (MEC, 2018).

In 2018, the MEC, together with the Organization of American States and Universidad Iberoamericana, implemented a teacher-training course focused on inclusive education. The course lasted five months and included a total of 360 hours of training (Agencia de Información Paraguaya, 2018; Organización de los Estados Iberoamericanos, 2018). Although the course trained 1,100 teachers, this represents a very small proportion compared with the total number of teachers in Paraguay, which amounts to 75,868 in basic school education alone (Ministry of Education and Sciences, 2023; Organización de los Estados Iberoamericanos, 2018).

A qualitative study with parents of children with autism in Paraguay reported a significant gap in teacher training required to provide quality education to their children, which limits educators' ability to offer individualized and effective attention in inclusive classrooms (Rodas Jara et al., 2023). Teacher training and access to professional development programs are factors that can influence teachers' self-efficacy for addressing inclusive education and serving students with ASD in the classroom. Therefore, the availability and scope of such training opportunities may have a direct impact on teachers' perceived self-efficacy in this context. These concerns are highlighted when compared with the study conducted with teachers by Vázquez de Cañete et al. (2024) in Alto Paraná, where 89% of teachers reported lacking basic tools to serve students with disabilities, including autism. The research also identified three key elements for effective infrastructure: specialized physical resources, digital platforms with locally

relevant content, and distribution systems oriented toward rural areas, along with training in their use and mechanisms for continuous evaluation.

Given that teacher self-efficacy plays a fundamental role in the effective inclusion of students with autism in the classroom, the need to study this variable in the Paraguayan context becomes evident, especially considering that, to date and to the best of current knowledge, no previous research has specifically addressed this topic in the country.

In this regard, the present study aims to analyze Paraguayan teachers' perceived self-efficacy in relation to the pedagogical practices used for the educational inclusion of students with ASD, as well as to assess the reliability and validity of an instrument previously developed in English and translated/adapted into Spanish for this purpose.

Given the relevance of this topic, the results obtained are expected to contribute empirical evidence for the design of educational public policies and the development of teacher-training programs aimed at strengthening pedagogical competencies in inclusive education contexts.

Methodology

This study corresponds to a quantitative, cross-sectional investigation with an exploratory and non-experimental level of inquiry, since the research variables were not manipulated (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2010). Considering the characteristics of the population included in this study, intentional non-probabilistic chain sampling—also known as snowball sampling—was used (Rumrill, 2011). This approach allows the identification of participants who possess the desired characteristics, in this case, teachers in Paraguay who provide instruction in regular or inclusive classrooms.

A total of 121 teachers participated in the study, the majority of whom identified as female (85.1%), with a smaller proportion identifying as male (14.9%). Ninety-five percent of participants work in public institutions; 43% teach at the upper-secondary level, 19% at the early-education level, 17% in the first and second cycles, and 15% in the third cycle. Regarding academic training, 63.64% of the teachers hold the

profile required by the Directorate of Inclusive Education. The most frequent type of training in which teachers reported participating was workshops (30.38%). With respect to work experience, 30.6% of the teachers have more than 20 years of service, reflecting extensive experience in the field. Additionally, 26.4% have between 15 and 20 years of experience, while those with fewer than 10 years represent a minority, indicating that this segment of the sample is relatively new to the teaching profession.

The instrument was administered to 121 in-service teachers in Paraguay who have experience working with students with autism in inclusive classrooms. Data were collected using an adapted scale (Hastings & Brown, 2002). The original scale contains five items; however, two additional items were incorporated for this study. Regarding the design and adaptation of the instrument, the first two authors selected the items from Hastings and Brown (2002), adapting them to the metric used in this investigation. The instrument was then reviewed by two experts, and modifications were made based on their feedback. Subsequently, a pilot survey was applied to 10 teachers with characteristics similar to those of the final sample.

The final adapted instrument specifically assesses self-efficacy by considering aspects such as teacher satisfaction with their instructional methodology, effectiveness of teaching practices, curricular adaptations, assessment diversity, learning strategies, and teacher self-confidence in teaching students with ASD in regular classrooms.

Participant responses were coded using SPSS (version 25). To determine the level of perceived self-efficacy, variables from the scale were recoded and grouped into a single variable through summation. The new variable, "level of perceived self-efficacy," was then categorized into three levels: low, medium, and high. In addition, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed to generate the structure of a theoretical model and evaluate factor loadings of the items comprising the scale. Other psychometric data are available for this scale when used with teachers and parents, but without translation or adaptation into Spanish. Previous research has found the scale to

have excellent internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha = .94 (Hastings & Brown, 2002).

Table 1 reports a Cronbach's alpha value > 0.90 , indicating excellent or high reliability of the instrument used (George & Mallery, 2003). The Spanish-translated scale used in this research obtained a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.924, representing a high level of internal consistency among the items. This result indicates that the items are highly coherent and measure the same construct related to teachers' perceptions of the inclusion of students with autism.

Table 1. Instrument reliability.

Indicator	Result
Cronbach's alpha	0,924
Number of items	7
Level of conceptual coherence	High

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Universidad Santa Clara de Asís. Following ethical research guidelines (APA, 2013), the study was conducted after obtaining informed consent from the teachers invited to participate. Each participant received an information leaflet and provided informed consent prior to inclusion in the study. Additionally, voluntary participation and confidentiality regarding participants' identities and data were ensured.

Results

A total of 121 teachers from various regions of Paraguay participated in this study. This section presents the findings from the descriptive and inferential analyses aligned with the study's objective.

General Descriptive Statistics

According to the results shown in table 2, a significant portion of teachers reported a medium level of perceived self-efficacy (56.2%), suggesting moderate confidence. However, an important percentage (37.2%) expressed high confidence in their ability to teach students with ASD. In contrast, a small group (6.6%) reported low self-efficacy.

Table 3 details the findings for perceived self-efficacy by item. The results suggest that teachers feel moderately satisfied with the methods they use and confident in their ability to implement evidence-based

practices and adjust strategies for students with ASD. However, a considerable percentage feels less prepared, particularly regarding the use of assessment strategies (11.6%) and the implementation of evidence-based practices (9.1%).

Table 2. Distribution of Teachers' Perceived Self-Efficacy Levels.

Sel-efficacy level	Frequency	Percentage
Low	8	6.6%
Medium	68	56.2%
High	45	37.2%
Total	121	100%

Table 3. Perceived Self-Efficacy Level by Item.

Item	Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High (%)	Total
1. Satisfaction with teaching methodology for students with ASD	19.8%	65.3%	14.9%	121
2. Confidence in teaching students with ASD	20.6%	58.7%	20.7%	121
3. Perceived effectiveness of teaching/support techniques	14.1%	66.1%	19.8%	121
4. Curriculum adjustments for students with ASD	17.4%	59.5%	23.1%	121
5. Ability to use diverse assessment strategies	11.6%	54.6%	33.8%	121
6. Ability to employ alternative strategies (behavior management)	7.4%	55.4%	37.2%	121
7. Confidence in implementing evidence-based practices	9.1%	60.3%	30.6%	121

Construct Validity

Construct validity was assessed using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), aiming to identify the latent structure of the items and determine their grouping into one or more factors. The analysis was carried out in SPSS using the principal components extraction method without rotation, as the objective was to explore the instrument's one-dimensionality. Kaiser's criterion was applied to retain factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. The analysis also considered the cumulative variance explained, factor loadings, and the component matrix to assess internal coherence and theoretical alignment.

The EFA results shown in Table 4 indicate that all items loaded onto a single component, demonstrating that the Spanish translation of the instrument has a coherent unidimensional structure consistent with the theoretical construct. These findings provide empirical evidence supporting the construct validity of the scale, confirming that the items measure a single dimension related to teachers' perceived self-efficacy for the educational inclusion of students with autism.

Table 5 presents the findings on the variables that may predict teacher self-efficacy. The results suggest that years of teaching experience are a significant positive predictor of self-efficacy, that is, teachers with more years of experience are more likely to report higher self-efficacy ($Exp(B) = 1.23, p = 0.02$). Training type (workshops) also positively predicts higher self-efficacy ($Exp(B) = 2.12, p = 0.01$), indicating that teachers who attended workshop-based training are more likely to report high self-efficacy. Educational level, however, does not significantly predict perceived self-efficacy ($p = 0.55$), suggesting that formal educational attainment does not have a substantial impact on teachers' perceived self-efficacy.

Table 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis of the Scale.

Item	Component
1. Satisfaction with teaching methodology for students with ASD	,145
2. Confidence in teaching students with ASD	,165
3. Perceived effectiveness of teaching methods	,158
4. Curriculum adjustments for students with ASD	,160
5. Use of diverse assessment strategies	,163
6. Alternative strategies to facilitate learning	,157
7. Confidence in evidence-based practices for students with autism	,169

Table 5. Logistic Regression to Predict Perceived Self-Efficacy.

Predictor Variable	B	Standard Error	Exp(B)	p-value	95% Confidence interval
Teaching Experience	0.21	0.08	1.23	0.02	[1.05, 1.43]
Educational Level (1 = Secondary, 0 = Other)	-0.15	0.25	0.86	0.55	[0.45, 1.29]
Type of Training (1 = Workshop, 0 = Other)	0.75	0.30	2.12	0.01	[1.17, 3.86]
Constant	-1.25	0.45	0.29	0.005	

Discussion

This study examined the perceived self-efficacy of Paraguayan teachers regarding the educational inclusion of students with autism and validated an instrument adapted to the local context. The results show that most teachers (53.4%) perceive their self-efficacy at a medium level, indicating moderate confidence but also highlighting critical areas needing enhancement, such as the use of diverse assessment strategies and the implementation of evidence-based practices.

These findings align with international studies linking teacher self-efficacy to the quality of inclusion (Larcombe et al., 2019) and its association with variables such as professional commitment (Fathi et al., 2021), resilience (Love et al., 2020), and reduced work-related stress (Li, 2023).

In Paraguay, although the Ministry of Education and Sciences (MEC, 2023) has promoted training in inclusion, coverage remains limited (e.g., 1,000 trained teachers versus 75,000 in service). This gap partly explains the difficulties reported by families of students with autism, who perceive insufficient pedagogical support (Rodas-Jara et al., 2023). The discrepancy between teacher self-perception and families' experiences underscores the need for more comprehensive policies incorporating specialized training, accessible resources, and systematic evaluation (Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Beaton, 2021).

The adapted instrument demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha = .924$) and unidimensional validity, supporting its use in Spanish-speaking contexts. This represents a relevant contribution for future research, particularly in countries facing similar challenges in teacher training (Gómez-Marí et al., 2022). However, the study presents limitations: (1) non-probabilistic sampling, limiting generalizability; (2) a high proportion of teachers with prior inclusion training, which may bias results; and (3) a cross-sectional design, preventing causal inferences.

To address these limitations, three research avenues are proposed. First, future studies should aim for

representative samples across different teaching levels and training backgrounds, using stratified sampling to generalize findings to Paraguay's broader educational system (Sharma & Sokal, 2023). Second, mixed-methods approaches could enrich understanding by combining quantitative data with qualitative analyses that explore the real impact on students with ASD (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). Finally, longitudinal studies are recommended to assess how structured mentoring and coaching programs can enhance teacher self-efficacy over time, following internationally validated models (Kraft et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2021).

The results—which show moderate self-efficacy but notable areas for improvement—call for coordinated systemic responses. Priority actions include ongoing teacher training focused on ASD-specific strategies, particularly practical workshops based on proven approaches (Suhrheinrich, 2011). Likewise, robust public policies are needed to ensure adequate resources and continuous monitoring (UNESCO, 2020). As several studies emphasize, the success of inclusive education depends heavily on fostering a collaborative school culture, where administrators, teachers, and families work in alignment (Alnahdi & Schwab, 2021). The active involvement of educational communities strengthens accessibility and inclusion, promoting “a more inclusive education that also reinforces the sense of belonging and social cohesion in a culturally diverse context such as Paraguay” (Rodas-Jara et al., 2024).

This study provides relevant empirical evidence to guide future research and educational policy in Paraguay and similar contexts, reaffirming that teacher self-efficacy is a key factor for achieving effective and high-quality inclusive education for all students.

Author contributions

RLRJ: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, supervision, writing – original draft, writing – review and final editing. LRRJ & FF: Writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

MLM, MFB, LCO, LDP, OSA, DBD, EVR: Writing – review and editing. CA: Review and editing.

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