

Chapter XXXIII

PREDICTORS OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AMONG STUDENTS OF THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION¹

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Abstract: Simultaneously with the development of inclusive education world-wide, studies aiming to reveal and refine understanding of teachers' attitudes towards work with children with additional support needs are being conducted. Previous research of teacher-related variables, such as their education and practice, resulted in obtaining only a small number of consistently significant determinants of attitudes towards inclusive education. Unlike most of the previous research, this study is concerned with a different category of plausible determinants – psychological dispositions which may form attitudes towards work with children with additional support needs. The variables from emotional and cognitive realm were selected: emotional self-efficacy, belief in a just world, and cognitive rigidity. The importance of these predictors was examined in a sample of 166 students of the Faculty of Education. During the first phase, students responded to an emotional intelligence scale, belief in a just world scale, and to a non-verbal test of cognitive rigidity. In the second phase they responded to a scale of attitudes towards inclusive education of children with disabilities. The results revealed relatively complex and significant relationships between named predictors and attitudes. The emotional self-efficacy had a positive and non-moderated influence on students' attitudes ($\beta = 24, p = .004$). The relation between belief in a just world and attitudes was moderated by the cognitive rigidity. When cognitive rigidity of the respondents was low, belief in a just world had no influence, but in a case of high cognitive rigidity, this belief became the strongest predictor of attitudes ($\beta = 35, p = .001$). The relatively high proportion of attitudes' variance was explained by examined models of predictors ($16.9 \leq R^2 \leq 17.4$). Pedagogical implications of the obtained findings are discussed.

Keywords: *inclusive education, emotional self-efficacy, belief in a just world, cognitive rigidity, students of faculty of education.*

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Introduction

Internationally-agreed commitments and efforts to provide inclusive education became more vivid in the new millennium but remained unfulfilled to a large degree (e.g., Mizunoya, Mitra, Yamasaki 2016). Developing a school system to become a place for learning and the social participation of every child implies a multidimensional strategy, ranging from official educational policy to the level of classroom practice (Booth, Ainscow 2002). The complexity and pervasiveness of this development do not, however, conceal the crucial role of teachers. Teaching in a heterogeneous group, including children with additional support needs, presupposes the use of various methods and materials, arrangement of different learning settings, a different pace of children's activities and other individualized instructional strategies. As teachers' effectiveness increases, lower achieving pupils are the first to benefit (Sanders, Rivers 1996). Furthermore, not only the way teachers work but also what they believe should be addressed in the implementation of inclusive education (e.g. Macura-Milovanović, Gera, Kovačević 2010). Jordan, Lindsay and Stanovich (1997) found that teachers' amount and type of interaction with pupils who are exceptional and at risk of academic failure, as well as teachers' use of quality instructional techniques and adaptation to the pupils' level of understanding are all delivered as a function of teachers' views on or beliefs about inclusion.

Teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education were the subject of numerous studies. The attitude can be defined as an evaluative integration of cognitions and affects experienced in relation to work (or an idea of work) with children with additional support needs (cf. attitude definition by Prislin, Crano 2008).

The focus of empirical investigations was mainly on measuring teachers' attitudes and determining the factors which have an influence on those attitudes. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) categorized possible factors into three groups: child-related, teacher-related and educational environment-related. By child-related variables, researchers usually subsume the type and severity of impairments. We do believe, however, that each of the child-related variables can and should be viewed from the perspective of both the educational system and its readiness for inclusion as well as the readiness of teachers specifically. It is about consistency with the concept of inclusive education and it is about acknowledging that, for much of the time, the priority remains to analyse and succeed in dealing with social barriers (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001).

The focus of this study is on teacher-related variables. Previous research resulted in obtaining only a small number of consistently significant teacher-related factors which have an influence on attitudes towards inclusive education. A review of studies in the last two decades of the 20th century led to the conclusion that none of the teacher-related variables alone could be regarded

as a strong predictor of educator attitudes (Avramidis, Norwich 2002). The following review revealed three variables which were associated with teachers' attitudes: years of teaching experience (in a negative direction), experience in inclusive education, and training in special needs education (in a positive direction) (de Boer, Pijl, Minnaert 2011). However, later studies did not support the significance of these correlates. Rajović and Jovanović (2010) stated it was teachers' private experience with children with special education needs which made a difference in attitudes, not their professional experience. In a similar vein, Galović, Brojčin, and Glumbić (2014) concluded that attitudes were not moulded by the quantity of the experience in an inclusive setting, but by the quality of experience (positive or negative). Several studies revealed that self-perceived abilities were important for the implementation of inclusion: teacher self-efficacy and self-perceived expertise were positively associated with more favourable attitudes towards inclusion (Soodak, Podell, Lehman 1998; Starčević, Macura, Topalović 2018; Wilkins, Nietfeld 2004).

Studies on a sample of pre-service teachers were even more inconclusive. Hastings et al. (Hastings, Hewes, Lock, Witting 1996) found that students with higher levels of previous contact with children with severe learning difficulties had generally more positive perceptions than those with little or no previous experience. However, a few years later Hastings and Oakford (2003) inferred there was little support for the effects of previous experience with children with special needs (i.e., additional support needs) on student teachers' attitudes. Others found minimal effects for a range of variables (Tait, Purdie 2000) or rather small correlations with the attitudes (up to .23) (Loreman, Forlin, Sharma 2007). In a recent study, Orlić et al. (Orlić, Pejčić, Lazarević, Milanović 2016) found that self-assessment of professional competence was a relatively strong predictor of students' attitudes ($\beta = .29, p = .00$). At the same time, this study is one of the rare ones which expanded the usual set of examined predictors to include a personality trait – openness to experience – and it proved to be a significant predictor ($\beta = .14, p = .04$). Similarly, Openness as a basic personality dimension was positively correlated with the attitudes towards inclusive education ($r = .32, p = .001$) in a sample of teachers (Todorović, Stojiljković, Ristanić, Djigić 2011).

At present, there are few convincing teacher-related factors as predictors of attitudes towards working with children with additional support needs except perhaps self-perception of competencies. However, self-perception of competencies is sometimes regarded as an element of attitudes (e.g., Sideridis, Chandler 1997). Thus, it seems reasonable to move beyond the variables which were typically regarded as plausible determinants of attitude. The findings indeed suggested a certain predictive value of personality traits (Orlić et al. 2014; Todorović et al. 2011). This study goes further in the investigation of psychological dispositions which may influence the formation of teachers' attitudes.

Having in mind that attitude presents an evaluative integration of cognitions and affects, the selected variables are from the emotional and cognitive realm: emotional self-efficacy, belief in a just world, and cognitive rigidity. These variables and their plausible role will be briefly discussed below.

Emotional self-efficacy

The emotional dimension of teaching had been largely underestimated and it started to gain more attention in the 21st century (e.g. Demetriou, Wilson 2009). Teaching is emotionally demanding and inability to understand and manage emotions can lead to burnout in the case of novice teachers (e.g., Blomberg, Knight 2015) or impedes the implementation of educational reforms (e.g., Bahia, Freire, Amaral, Estrela 2013). Emotional intelligence is a relatively new construct which may contribute to understanding teachers' professional competencies from the emotional perspective.

It is important, however, to make a distinction between models of emotional intelligence (EI) predicated by the way of their operationalization – by achievement measures or by self-reports. This distinction implies their conceptual differentiation as well (Petrides, Furnham 2000, 2001). In other words, there are two types of EI constructs: EI as ability and EI as a trait. The former is operationalized by achievement measures and the later by self-reports. Self-report assessments are inextricably bound with the conceptualization of EI as a personality trait or as a group of personality characteristics presumably located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies (Pérez, Petrides, Furnham 2005). Emotional self-efficacy is another name for EI as a trait. In this study, it represents original Salovey and Mayer's model of EI operationalized by self-report measure. Emotional self-efficacy thus comprises self-perceived abilities regarding appraisal, expression, regulation, and utilization of emotions (Schutte et al. 1998).

Considering that higher self-estimations of professional competencies were associated with positive attitudes towards inclusion (e.g., Orlić et al. 2016; Soodak et al. 1998; Starčević et al. 2018; Wilkins, Nietfeld 2004) the influence of emotional self-efficacy on pre-service teachers' attitudes towards inclusion seems worth investigating. A positive influence of trait EI is expected.

Belief in a just world

Individuals' need to believe in a just world where people generally get what they deserve has been the subject of continuous research interest since the 1970s (e.g., Furnham 2003; Hafer, Sutton 2016). Lerner and Miller (as cited by Furnham 2003) indicated that people are very reluctant to give up this belief and employ different mechanisms to maintain it. Early studies were

concentrated on the negative side of this phenomenon, such as victim derogation, but after that a string of investigations of belief in a just world were included (BJW) as a healthy coping mechanism with psychological benefits (e.g., Furnham 2003). For example, high BJW was associated with efficient coping with stressful situations and higher achievement (Tomaka, Blascovich 1994). Brown and Grover (1998) later discovered that BJW moderated the influence of low stressor exposer but had no influence under conditions of higher stress.

The studies of attitudes towards people with illnesses or disabilities exposed the negative side of BJW. Some of them reported direct (e.g., Furnham 1995; Keller, Siegrist 2010) and others reported indirect influence of BJW (e.g., Bizer, Hart, Jekogian 2012). BJW predicted negative attitudes towards people with physical disabilities ($\beta = .14$) beyond socio-demographic variables and personality (Keller, Siegrist 2010). Bizer et al. (2012) showed that negative attitudes about people with mental illness and intentions to discriminate were distally rooted in BJW, which predisposed people towards higher social dominance orientation. Others did not find a significant influence of just-world beliefs (Rüsch, Todd, Bodenhausen, Corrigan 2010).

While the above empirical findings suggest that BJW would probably have a negative impact on teachers' attitudes towards work with children with additional support needs, others cast some doubt on this conclusion. Dalbert (as cited by Furnham 2003) stated that if a person can help substantially, those who believe in a just world are more likely to help and further to expect "good fate" as a reward. In line with this Bierhoff, Klein, and Kramp (1991) found that first aiders are characterized by BJW more than people who did not help in an accident. They explained that a strong BJW leads to an increase in helpfulness when the perceived injustice created by another person's plight can be alleviated by one's own efforts. Besides, the above findings are concerned with the attitudes towards adults with additional support needs. BJW role in pre-service teachers' perceptions of work with children that are vulnerable in a similar way has yet to be explored.

Cognitive rigidity

The notion of cognitive rigidity has been discussed from a variety of theoretical positions and is usually connected to cognitive style, creativity or social-psychology constructs (Proroković 2002). It is opposed to cognitive flexibility and as such refers to unawareness or a narrow perception of the available alternatives in a given situation, as well as the lack of willingness to be flexible and adapt to the situation (cf. Martin, Rubin 1995). Similarly, it can be regarded as a limited ability to switch or restructure cognitive sets to adapt to the changing environment (e.g., Dennis, Van der Wal 2010). Rigid persons are typically

dogmatic, ethnocentric, conservative, inflexible, and have a lack of tolerance for ambiguity (Proroković 2002).

In the field of education, cognitive rigidity – or its opposite, cognitive flexibility – was mainly examined in relation to pupils' learning and the ways teachers can scaffold this process. There were only a few studies of related phenomena regarding teachers' thinking, such as cognitive processing of complex school-based scenarios (Kim, Klassen 2018). As Kim and Klassen (2018) stated, it is important to research and develop teachers' cognitive flexibility because they encounter challenging school situations every day. It could be even more important when changes in education and school reforms take place. Specifically, teaching in a heterogeneous group presupposes a great deal of flexibility. These were the main reasons why cognitive rigidity was included as a conceivable predictor of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. It is expected that cognitive rigidity will exert a negative influence on attitudes.

Method

Participants and procedure

This study was conducted on a sample of 166 students of the Faculty of Education in Jagodina. The sample consisted of 146 female (88%) and 20 male (12%) respondents. About half of the participants were future teachers ($n = 79$) and the others were future preschool teachers ($n=64$) and boarding school teachers ($n = 23$). The mean age of participants was $M = 21.92$ ($SD = 2.64$).

At the beginning, potential examinees were informed that the aim of the study was to determine relations between several variables regarding their cognition and emotions. In order to avoid having an influence on the responses they were not informed about other specifics of the variables. Examinees were tested at the faculty premises, during regular classroom hours, and were compensated for their efforts by being granted extra course credits. Participation in the research was organized in a way which ensured that examinees were anonymous.

In the first step, students responded to the emotional intelligence scale, belief in a just world scale, and to the non-verbal test of cognitive rigidity. In the second step, they responded to the scale of attitudes towards inclusive education of children with disabilities.

Instruments

The Schutte Self Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) (Schutte et al. 1998)

Emotional self-efficacy was measured by a translated and adapted SSEIT with 33-items. Items represent dimensions of the original EI model of Salovey and Mayer: a) appraisal and expression of emotion in the self and others ((e.g., “I can tell how people are feeling by listening to the tone of their voice”), b) regulation of emotion in the self and others (“I help other people feel better when they are down”) and c) utilization of emotions in solving problems (e.g., “I use good moods to help myself keep trying in the face of obstacles”). Five-point rating scales (endpoints: strongly disagree/strongly agree) accompany each item. This instrument has been used extensively in research. Its internal consistency ranged from .70 to .85 (Pérez et al. 2005).

The Belief in a Just World Scale (BJW-S) (Ćubela 2002)

The 13-items Croatian version of the scale was adapted for use in this study. Six items belong to the general BJW (the world is generally just) and the rest of the items represent personal BJW (the world is just towards me). Responses are given on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Ćubela (2002) reported Cronbach Alphas beyond .70 and stated the convergent-discriminative validity of the scale.

Breskin's Test of Rigidity (BRT) (Breskin, 1968)

Test items are 15 pairs of visual stimuli differing with respect to the gestalt law of simplicity. Each of the pairs consists of one stimulus in accordance with the law of simplicity and the other stimulus disobeying it. Respondents are directed to express their preference for one visual stimulus among two elements of each pair. Higher scores reflect greater rigidity. Proroković (2002) reported good test-retest reliability ($r = .82$) on a sample of Croatian students and lower but still satisfying internal consistency ($\alpha = .70$).

Teachers' Attitudes towards Inclusion of Children with Difficulties Scale (Mihčić, Vulić-Prtorić 2002)

The scale used in this study was an adapted Croatian version of the original scale (constructed by Sideridis, Chandler 1997). Four items were excluded in order to adjust the scale for use on a sample of pre-service teachers. Each of the remaining eight items is used for attitudes assessment towards the inclusion of children with five types of difficulties: physical, intellectual, behavioural, hearing impairment, and autism. Thus, the scale has a total of 40-items. Items

concern teachers' confidence about their own knowledge and skills and teachers' perception of potential benefits and risks inclusive education may bring. Responses are given on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Results

Internal consistency and correlations of measures

Table 1 presents correlation coefficients between four main variables and Cronbach's alphas of their measures which are in parentheses on the diagonal of the table. All but the test of rigidity had high Alphas (above 0.80). In order to improve the internal consistency of BTR three items were omitted from the test. The second value in the parenthesis presents internal consistency of reduced BTR. This version of BTR was used in further data analysis.

Attitudes towards inclusion had a positive and moderate correlation with trait EI and belief in a just world. Attitudes were not associated with cognitive rigidity.

Table 1: Study measures: Coefficients of internal consistency and bivariate correlations

Variables	SSEIT	BJW-S	BTR	ATI
Emotional self-efficacy (SSEIT)	(.85)			
Belief in a just world (BJW-S)	.34**	(.82)		
Cognitive rigidity (BTR)	.01	.08	(.50)/(.60)	
Attitudes towards inclusion (ATI)	.33**	.29**	.06	(.90)

Notes: **p< .01; *p< .05.

Regression analyses

To determine the proportion of variance of teachers' attitudes which could be explained by chosen predictors a series of hierarchical multiple regressions were computed. The main findings are presented in Table 2. The direct influence was examined in the case of emotional self-efficacy and BJW because these two variables were associated with teachers' attitudes. Both variables were significant predictors as well (Model 1).

Additional analyses were aimed to test if cognitive rigidity had a moderating role in the prediction model. It turned out that cognitive rigidity indeed was a significant moderator of the influence of BJW on attitudes towards inclusion (Model 2). The model encompassing the moderating effect of BJW led

to an increased proportion of explained variance of attitudes (from 14.4% to 16.9%). Further, when cognitive rigidity of the respondents was low (Model 3), just-world beliefs had no influence and the proportion of explained variance of attitudes was the highest ($R^2 = 17.4\%$). In contrast, in the case of high cognitive rigidity (Model 4), just-world beliefs became the strongest predictor of teachers' attitudes ($\beta = .35, p = .001$).

Table 2: Results of hierarchical multiple regression analyses in predicting attitudes

Models	β	t (p)	R^2
Model 1			
<i>Step 1</i>			
Trait EI	.32	.000	.107
<i>Step 2</i>			
Trait EI	.25	.003	
Belief in a just world (BJW)	.22	.008	.144
Model 2			
Trait EI	.24	.004	
Belief in a just world (BJW)	.19	.021	
Cognitive rigidity (CR)	.07	.395	
CR x BJW	.16	.035	.169
Model 3			
Trait EI	.23	.005	
Belief in a just world (BJW)	.01	.903	
Low cognitive rigidity (CR)	.07	.378	
Low CR x BJW	.26	.023	.174
Model 4			
Trait EI	.24	.003	
Belief in a just world (BJW)	.35	.001	
High cognitive rigidity (CR)	.07	.388	
High CR x BJW	.23	.030	.171

Notes: β = standardized regression coefficient; t(p) = significance of the predictor; R^2 = coefficient of multiple determination

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine a new set of predictors of teachers' attitudes towards working with children with additional support needs. As previous research of teacher-related variables, such as their education and practice, resulted in obtaining a limited number of significant determinants, it seemed reasonable to explore the predictive potential of a different category of teacher-related variables—psychological dispositions. Bearing in mind that attitude presents an evaluative integration of cognitions and affects, the selected variables were from the emotional and cognitive realm: emotional self-efficacy, belief in a just world, and cognitive rigidity.

The results revealed relatively complex and significant relationships between the named predictors and attitudes. Emotional self-efficacy had a positive and non-moderated influence on students' attitudes. This was expected partly because self-perceived competence as a predictor of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion gained substantial empirical support (Orlić et al. 2016; Soodak et al. 1998; Starčević et al. 2018; Wilkins, Nietfeld 2004). More importantly, in this study, self-estimated abilities belong to the domain of emotions. It is known that fulfillment of a teaching role requires emotional labor from a teacher (e.g., Bahia et al. 2013). Teachers are faced day-to-day with demanding relational situations which presuppose a range of socio-emotional skills and abilities. Teachers' emotional vulnerability may be particularly vivid during the first year of employment (e.g., Blomberg, Knight 2015) and during the implementation of education reform (e.g., Bahia et al., 2013). Their receptivity for change – as inclusive education regularly demands – depends on how they perceive their own capacities to overcome challenges. If they doubt their own competence, anxiety and hostility towards inclusion will increase (e.g., Soodak et al. 1998).

At first glance, just-world beliefs had a positive influence on teachers' attitudes and cognitive rigidity had no influence. More detailed analyses revealed, however, that the influence of BJW was moderated by cognitive rigidity. In the case of students low on cognitive rigidity, just-world beliefs had no influence on attitudes. That is to say, it was unimportant if students believed that a world is just or not, the only significant predictor of attitudes was emotional self-efficacy. In the case of students high on cognitive rigidity, just-world beliefs were the strongest predictor of attitudes.

A review didn't reveal any studies regarding the relation of just-world beliefs and attitudes towards children with additional support needs. In this study BJW exposed its positive side (except in the case of low cognitive rigidity) unlike the previous findings considering attitudes towards adults. Further, uncovering the moderating role of cognitive rigidity in the relation between BJW and attitudes may be important for two reasons. To begin with, the moderating

role of cognitive rigidity could help to explain inconsistent results regarding the influence (e.g., Keller, Siegrist 2010) or the lack of influence (Rüsch et al. 2010) of BJW on attitudes towards people with disabilities. It could be argued that the presence of influence is determined by the level of cognitive rigidity. Secondly, it was expected that cognitive rigidity itself would have a negative impact on attitudes towards work with children with disabilities. Separate education streams still represent a compelling idea for some educational stakeholders, hence implementation of inclusive education requires a cognitive shift from past practices. In addition, teaching in a heterogeneous group entails advanced flexibility of the teacher. It is worth knowing that even if pre-service teachers are rigid and more inclined to simplicity, they may have more positive attitudes towards working with children with disabilities, presuming that they believe in a just world. However, before the final conclusion about the desirability of BJW it would be necessary to examine its impact on the idea of working with Roma children or with comparably disadvantaged social groups. Being aware of the plausible BJW negative consequence in the form of victim derogation (e.g., Furnham 2003) it is imperative to investigate whether the issues of poverty and marginalisation would be justified by blaming Roma children and their parents.

Conclusion

This study confirmed basic expectations that psychological dispositions are important for inclusive education, i.e. for accepting and teaching children with disabilities. In a way, the findings of the study go along with an old idea that not everyone can be a teacher.

The study implicates it is important that students perceive themselves as the ones who have the abilities to appraise and express emotions adequately, to regulate emotions in the self and others and also to succeed in the utilization of emotions in solving problems. This finding can inform the selection process for university enrolment but also initial education programs. Bahia et al. (2013) concluded that institutions responsible for the initial [undergraduate] training of teachers must be more proactive in preparing students to address their own issues as well as the emotions of others.

Cognizant of the inconsistencies of the impact of BJW (positive and negative, towards adults and towards children) future research on its influence on attitudes towards Roma children is recommended. It could shed some light on the best way to deal with just world beliefs of students and thus advise strategies in initial education programs.

The study also gave some support for the development of cognitive flexibility (i.e., enrichment of cognitive rigidity) although not in expected intensity. Perhaps it would be more salient if cognitive flexibility (not its opposite) was

examined. It is encouraging that cognitive processes are malleable and can increase in less than three months on a teacher education program (Hennissen, Beckers, Moerkerke 2017).

For more reliable conclusions about the chosen predictors, they should be further investigated on new and bigger samples.

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