



Individualized student support in primary school teaching: A review of influencing factors using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The TPB was reviewed with respect to individualized student support in primary school teaching.
- Experienced teachers are more likely to implement individualized measures of support.
- Control of self-efficacy and intrinsic intentions to implement support interventions are of particular importance.
- Teachers' attitudes towards individualized student support exert an indirect influence on its implementation.
- Teachers with as well as without advanced training are equally likely to provide individualized support.

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ABSTRACT

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991), each behavior results from a behavioral intention, which in turn depends on attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. In this study, the TPB was investigated with respect to individualized student support and teachers' intrinsic and extrinsic support intentions involving 488 primary school teachers. Employing individualized support interventions was predicted directly by self-efficacy beliefs and the intrinsic support intention as well as indirectly by teachers' attitudes. More practically experienced teachers implement support measures more often, while multi-group comparisons regarding advanced training showed no differences in the tested model for the TPB.

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1. Introduction

In 2005, the Austrian education act was extended to the effect that since then, every student in Austria has been entitled to individualized support (BMBWK, 2005). In line with this adaptation, a defined central objective of schools and teaching is to implement measures of individualized student support. In this context, especially approaches to learning and teaching have become the center of attention, providing numerous possibilities of individualized support due to internal differentiation between teaching methods as well as learning contents, materials,

timeframes and levels of learning objectives, which can all be used to adapt learning programs and conditions to the specific (learning) requirements and (learning) abilities of individual students (Bartnitzky, Hecker & Lassek, 2012; Breidenstein, 2014; Heymann, 2010; Prengel, 2010; Roy, Guay, & Valois, 2013; Saalfrank, 2008). Moreover, particularly primary schools – as schools for *all* children (Einsiedler, 2011; Prengel, 2010) – are called upon to meet these requirements in the face of increasing student heterogeneity (e.g. due to the inclusion of children with physical or mental challenges or migration backgrounds). In the German-speaking area, individualized support is explicitly considered a criterion for good teaching (Meyer, 2016).

In order to realize individualized support in the classroom, two characteristics of teachers are primarily discussed in inclusion research: the attitude of teachers towards inclusive learning and their self-efficacy beliefs regarding an individualized and

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differentiated teaching style (z.B. Bosse et al., 2017; Gebhardt, Schwab, Nusser, & Hessels, 2015; Kiely, Brownell, Lauterbach, & Benedict, 2015; Schäfers, 2009). Furthermore, research has focused on the motivation of teachers with respect to innovations as an individual characteristic (Baumert & Kunter, 2006; Hellmich & Görel, 2014). As far as the realization of individualized student support in class is concerned, it can therefore be assumed that teachers with a positive attitude and high self-efficacy regarding individualized support as well as intrinsically motivated teachers implement measures of targeted support of individual students in class to a higher degree. However, the Austrian national educational report of 2015, as one example, showed that in general, educational-political regulations concerning differentiation and individualized support in the classroom are barely implemented (Bruneforth et al., 2016). Also international research has argued that in practice, the application of such guidelines shows deficits (Racherbäumer & Kühn, 2013; Solzbacher, 2008). In this context, research still lacks empirical studies that systematically investigate individualized learning in the classroom as well as factors influencing the implementation of individualized support and teaching measures in particular.

Against this background, the current study aims at reviewing and/or predicting the support intention and concrete implementation of individualized student support in primary school classrooms using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991). According to the TPB, it can be assumed that *attitudes*, *subjective norms* and the *perceived behavioral control* are factors that directly influence *behavioral intentions*, which in turn directly influence the specific *behavior* shown in a given situation. To date, the TPB has been validated in numerous international studies and findings. With regard to school pedagogy, such studies are usually conducted in the context of inclusive education, investigating the hypothesized causal relations between the TPB's individual components on an empirical basis (Schüle, Schriek, Besa, & Arnold, 2016; Yan & Sin, 2013, 2014). Accordingly, the TPB appears to be a useful instrument to predict the support intention and the behavior relating to individualized teaching in class. The current study aims at expanding the state of empirical knowledge in this context and mainly distinguishes itself from previous research by choosing *individualized student support* as its research topic, adopting the method of an online survey and by focusing on primary schools. Apart from attitudes towards individualized support held by primary school teachers, the main focus of this study lies on their support intention and actual implementation of individualized support measures in primary school classrooms as well as the relationship of these two components. Not uncommonly, an attitude or intention is emphasized and a subsequent behavior implementation is uncritically presumed (Bagozzi, 2007; Bürg & Mandl, 2004; Kreidl, 2011).

In addition, the current study should provide explanations regarding potential differences of primary school teachers with different levels of professional experience and advanced training with respect to the implementation of individualized support and educational strategies. In this study, these individualized support and educational strategies mainly refer to the internal differentiation according to Saalfrank (2008), taking into account, for example, students' learning interests, learning speed as well as learning conditions or the use of different learning materials and tasks in everyday primary school teaching. Furthermore, it should be noted that the pedagogical understanding of the collective term *individualized support* has proven to be imprecise in German professional literature and the topic is accordingly discussed under different names such as adaptive teaching, individualized/self-regulated/personalized learning or internal differentiation. Basically, these terms encompass all measures that enable teachers to

offer targeted support to individual students by means of adaptive support and teaching. From a methodical-didactic point of view, individualization is regarded as the highest degree of differentiation in this context (Knauder, Strohmeier-Wieser, Holzer, Pobinger, & Pignitter, 2018).

2. Theoretical and empirical background

Based on the *Theory of Planned Behavior* (TPB; Ajzen, 1985, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000), the assumption can be made that attitudes have an indirect effect on a specific behavior due to an intercorrelation with subjectively perceived norms on the one hand and perceived behavioral control on the other hand. This behavior is even more likely the greater someone's intention to perform a certain action is. The *attitude towards the behavior* describes the extent to which a person values a specific behavior and whether the person expects that this behavior will lead to the associated consequences and related value. The *subjective concept of a norm* relates to the perceived social pressure of how relevant individuals value the execution or non-execution of a specific behavior and the need to act in line with this evaluation. *Perceived behavioral controls* refer to the estimation of one's resources, skills and competences necessary to show the respective behavior. Although the effects of attitudes and subjective norms on a specific behavior are mediated by the behavioral intention (Fishbein, 1980), the influence of perceived behavioral control is, according to Ajzen (1985), manifested both directly on the behavior itself as well as indirectly via the behavioral intention (see Fig. 1).

On a metatheoretical level and based on the *Theory of Reasoned Action* by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), Ajzen's TPB (1985) adopts an approach to humankind proposing that individuals are rational human beings who systematically process information made available to them and act in accordance with their subjectively perceived consequences (benefits) as well as the expectations of people who are important to them. This underlying assumption is consistent with the principal idea of the theory of subjective expected utility (see Edwards, 1954; as cited in Kühberger, 1994), stating that individuals have higher intentions to perform behaviors for whose realization they also perceive to have a high behavioral control. This perceived behavioral control is also in line with Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (Ajzen, 1991).

2.1. Attitudes towards the behavior

Current data on teachers' attitudes towards individualized support in the classroom and in schools suggest that teachers consider individualized support to be an important and worthy goal (Knauder et al., 2018; Knauder & Koschmieder, 2017; Racherbäumer & Kühn, 2013; Solzbacher, 2008). Moreover, Hartinger, Kleickmann, and Hawelka (2006) were able to demonstrate a relationship between teacher attitudes towards teaching and learning and the structure of their lessons. As far as future teachers are concerned, not only do they consider this individualization a crucial requirement to be mastered (Keller-Schneider, 2017), but they also have a distinctly positive attitude towards individualized student support at the beginning of their studies, which can be explained by intrinsic motivation and support from within the school (Knauder & Koschmieder, 2017; 2018). According to de Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2011), another key factor affecting attitudes of teachers besides extensive knowledge is specific teaching experience. This finding suggests that practical experience in (heterogeneous) classrooms may alter attitudes towards individualized support. To date, however, there have been no empirical studies addressing the relationship between attitude, intention and concrete behavior with respect to individualized support.

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