



Teacher self-efficacy in cross-national perspective

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined teacher self-efficacy in a cross-national setting.
- The unifactorial structure of the scale is generalizable across countries.
- Associations with other beliefs and practices are cross-nationally equivalent.
- Aggregating the scale to the country-level changes its meaning.
- Country-level variation is explained with value orientations and response styles.

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, teacher self-efficacy was examined in a cross-national setting. The cross-national generalizability of the scale and the meaning of cross-national variation in mean scores were investigated. Using data from TALIS involving 73,100 teachers in 23 countries, teacher self-efficacy was shown to have a similar unifactorial structure and equivalent positive correlations with teaching practices and job satisfaction across countries. At the country level, significant correlations were only found for job satisfaction; in addition, teacher self-efficacy was related to collectivism, modesty, and extremity scoring. Thus, mean score differences between countries mainly reflect cultural value orientations and response styles.

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1. Introduction

Being convinced of one's own ability is a fundament of human agency, also for teachers. A large body of research shows teacher self-efficacy to be closely related not only with teachers' well-being (e.g., Brouwers & Tomic, 2000), but also with their professional practices (e.g., Gibson & Dembo, 1984) and the educational outcomes of their students (e.g., Anderson, Greene, & Loewen, 1988). On account of its high relevance for teaching and learning, teacher self-efficacy has recently been included in international large scale surveys, such as the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), initiated by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; OECD, 2009), and the Teacher Education and Development Study in Mathematics (TEDS-M; Tatto et al., 2008). This raises the question to what extent the positive associations of teacher self-efficacy with, among other things,

student performance and job satisfaction that were found in earlier studies really inform us on possible implications for educational policy. Two questions need to be addressed. First, the question is whether the construct of teacher self-efficacy that is largely rooted in US research can be applied in other cultural contexts as well. Second, it needs to be questioned whether the findings from studies on the individual level can also be found at country level. Can teacher self-efficacy help us to understand cross-national performance differences on educational achievement tests? A prerequisite for answering these questions is a demonstration of the universal relevance and comparability of the concept of teacher self-efficacy. We set out to examine these, as yet, untested premises. We report a secondary analysis of data from OECD's TALIS (OECD, 2009, 2010b), complemented by several other cross-national data sets. First, we compare the structure and psychological function of the teacher self-efficacy construct across 23 countries. Second, we examine whether variations at the teacher- and country-levels have the same meanings, and we analyze the nomological network of country-level differences.

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1.1. Teacher self-efficacy

The construct of teacher self-efficacy is grounded largely in two influential psychological theories of the 20th century: Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966) and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986). In Locus of Control Theory teacher self-efficacy is described as the belief in the ability to affect student performance over and above the influences of students' home environments (Armor et al., 1976). This belief may depend on teachers' evaluations of their ability to perform behaviours effective towards reaching this goal, but it may also depend on the conviction that student performance is malleable by teachers. In the present article we refer to Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Theory that distinguishes between efficacy and outcome expectations. Based on this theory, self-efficacy of teachers can be defined as "individual beliefs in their capabilities to perform specific teaching tasks at a specified level of quality in a specified situation" (Dellinger, Bobbett, Olivier, & Ellett, 2008, p. 4).

Teacher self-efficacy reflects previous experiences, beliefs, and behaviour (e.g., Raudenbush, Rowan, & Fai Cheong, 1992) and it is a powerful predictor of future behaviour, especially of classroom teaching practices (e.g., Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Smylie, 1988). Moreover, it is associated with outcomes, such as teacher burnout and job satisfaction (e.g., Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, & Steca, 2003; Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Moè, Pazzaglia, & Ronconi, 2010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007) as well as student achievement (e.g., Anderson et al., 1988; Ashton & Webb, 1986; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006; Ross, 1992; for a review, see Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998).

1.2. The cross-national generalizability of teacher self-efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy could be influenced by national cultures in several ways. First, the basic structure of the construct may be culturally contingent, which would imply that behaviours and beliefs associated with teacher self-efficacy would vary across cultures and that there is no basis for comparing the construct across nations. Second, the strength of associations with educational processes and outcomes may vary, which would suggest that the psychological and practical relevance of the construct varies across countries. Third, we may observe cross-national differences in average teacher self-efficacy, which could reflect genuine cross-national differences as well as differences in self-presentational norms.

In discussing cross-national findings, we distinguish between structure- and level-oriented studies (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). The former refers to studies involving a comparison of the factor structure and of relationships with other variables (e.g., the association between teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction), whereas the latter refers to comparisons of means (e.g., cross-national comparisons of teacher self-efficacy scores).

1.2.1. Structure-oriented comparisons of teacher self-efficacy

Bandura's (1997) view that self-efficacy is universal has been challenged (e.g., Pajares, 2007; Schooler, 1990). It has been argued that the evaluation of one's capabilities is more important to one's well-being and satisfaction in individualistic cultures where ties between individuals are rather loose and an "I" consciousness, autonomy, and individual needs and rights are valued. In contrast, collectivistic cultures stress a "We" consciousness, collective identity, interpersonal connectedness, harmony, solidarity, duty, and conformity. This emphasis on the in-group may result in individual self-evaluations having a weaker impact on a person's well-being as compared to the evaluation of the own group (Kim, Triandis, Kağıtçıbaşı, Choi, & Yoon, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Bandura (2002) opposed this view, arguing "personal efficacy is valued not because of reverence for individualism but because a strong sense of efficacy is vital for successful adaptation and change regardless of whether it is achieved individually or by group members working together" (p. 272). In Bandura's view, no cross-national differences in teacher self-efficacy would be expected along the individualism-collectivism dimension. This debate has far-reaching consequences for the study of teacher self-efficacy: Applying the construct in non-Western cultures is only appropriate if it has a basically similar structure, psychological function, and effect on educational outcomes across countries.

The few empirical studies that have examined the universality of the psychological structure of teacher self-efficacy yielded inconsistent results. Klassen et al. (2009) employed questionnaire items designed to measure teacher self-efficacy in a sample of 1212 elementary/middle school and secondary school teachers in five countries: Canada, Cyprus, Korea, Singapore, and the United States. Across these countries a common three factor structure was identified (teacher self-efficacy for instructional strategies, teacher self-efficacy for student engagement, and teacher self-efficacy for classroom management). The study also showed cross-nationally similar patterns of correlations between teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction. A cross-nationally similar factorial structure of teacher self-efficacy was also reported by Ho and Hau (2004), who compared the factorial structure of a teacher self-efficacy instrument comprising four subscales (personal instruction efficacy, personal discipline efficacy, personal guidance efficacy, and beliefs about external influences) in a sample of 246 secondary school teachers from Australia and Hong Kong. However, contrary to Klassen et al. (2009), they found cross-national variation in the correlations between different sub-dimensions. Considerable cross-national differences in the factor structure of teacher self-efficacy were reported by Lin, Gorrell, and Taylor (2002). They applied the Gibson and Dembo (1984) teacher self-efficacy instrument to 481 preservice early childhood or elementary school teachers in Taiwan and the United States. The original two scales (personal teaching efficacy and general teaching efficacy) could not be replicated in Taiwan, suggesting that teachers in both countries have different conceptions of their own efficacy.

1.2.2. Level-oriented comparisons of teacher self-efficacy

Results of previous comparisons of mean scores for teacher self-efficacy across countries are more consistent than those of structure-oriented studies. East Asian teachers are frequently shown to have lower average self-efficacy scores than their western counterparts (e.g., Ho & Hau, 2004; Klassen et al., 2009; Lin et al., 2002). However, the interpretation of these differences is still a largely unresolved issue. When questionnaire scales are aggregated to the country level, the often implicit assumption is made that the aggregate score has a meaning similar to that at the individual level. This would mean that countries with higher scores of teacher self-efficacy have teachers who actually feel more efficacious. Upon closer scrutiny, this implication is far from evident. At the individual teacher level, teacher self-efficacy is a judgement of one's own teaching ability which, as argued before, is related to the teacher's level of job satisfaction, classroom teaching practices, and student outcomes. If the aggregate score had an equivalent meaning, similar relationships would be expected at the country level. The few studies that have compared teacher self-efficacy internationally, however, found comparatively low average scores for teachers in East Asian sites, such as Taiwan (Lin et al., 2002), Singapore (Klassen et al., 2009), and Hong Kong (Ho & Hau, 2004). As repeatedly found in studies conducted by the OECD, these education systems traditionally have high student performance levels in international comparisons (e.g., OECD, 2010a) and teachers with

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