



Investigating teacher attitudes of disability using a non-traditional theoretical framework of attitude

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ABSTRACT

It is widely known that attitudes have a direct relationship to teacher actions in the classroom; therefore, gaining an understanding of teacher knowledge and attitudes with regard to students with disabilities is an essential step in improving the educational outcomes and school experiences of these students. There has been an increase in investigations into teacher attitudes of disability in recent years. Many of these studies used traditional theoretical frameworks as a basis for research instrument development, and investigation of attitudes towards teaching students with disabilities. These studies often viewed attitude as a single entity, which can distort the depiction of these attitudes in the realm of special education. This paper outlines how a theoretical framework of attitude, developed by Van Aalderen-Smeets et al. (2012) for the investigation of primary school teachers' attitudes toward science, can be applied to research in the area of special education, and disability research. It argues that this framework is the most appropriate for the investigation into teacher attitudes towards students with disabilities and should serve as the theoretical basis for future research in this area.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Teacher attitudes toward disability in general

Teacher attitudes toward disability and inclusive education have received a growing volume of attention in recent years, with a focus on increasing the educational outcomes and positive school experiences of students with disabilities (Vaz et al., 2015). Research consistently points to a strong link between teacher knowledge and attitudes, and their resultant behaviour in the classroom (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Cronin-Jones, 1991; Kos, Richdale, & Hay, 2006; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005). Research into teacher attitudes predominantly uses traditional theoretical frameworks of attitude as a reference point for the development of research instruments and therefore ultimately narrows the field of questioning and the information gained from research conducted (Blotnicky-Gallant, Martin, McGonnell, & Corkum, 2015; Kos, 2008; Youssef & Youssef, 2015). These traditional theoretical frameworks describe attitude as a single entity and predominantly describe the well-established link between attitudes and behaviours, when specifically investigating the attitude towards completing a particular behaviour (Mulholland, 2016). Thus, they are innately problematic when investigating attitudes towards an entity

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that is not a behaviour, in the case of special education, disability, students who have those disabilities, and the teaching thereof, and behaviours associated with those disabilities.

Low disability knowledge and/or negative attitudes towards teaching children with disabilities or inclusive education often results in less use of accommodations and adjustments in the classroom, and less tolerance and acceptance of these students by their peers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Research has also shown that increasing teacher knowledge has a positive effect on their attitudes towards students with disabilities and their subsequent behaviour in the classroom (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000). The argument presented here is based on the assertion that to achieve positive improvements in the educational outcomes and school experience of students with disabilities, it is crucial for teachers to develop their own positive attitudes toward these students and the teaching thereof. It contends that finding an appropriate framework with which to examine teacher attitudes is the first essential step in this process.

The diagnosis, symptomology and management of many disabilities (including ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Emotion/Behavioural Disorders) is highly controversial among the general public and teaching profession (Kean, 2012). The diagnostic process and decisions about the management of such disabilities can be very emotive, while the behavioural manifestations of many disabilities can also be highly emotive and can cause high stress levels and frustration (Greene, Beszterczey, Katzenstein, Park, & Goring, 2002). This may have a significant impact on teacher attitudes of students with disabilities, and thus have a direct impact on a teacher's behaviour in the classroom. Investigating teacher attitudes using a traditional theoretical framework does not include these factors, and as such it has been difficult to develop accurate and reliable research instruments that provide a comprehensive investigation of teacher attitudes.

The remainder of this paper will discuss the traditional frameworks of attitudes, and demonstrate how the framework of attitude developed by van Aalderen-Smeets, Walma van der Molen, and Asma (2012) enables a more thorough investigation into teacher attitudes of disability, the students who have disabilities, and the teaching thereof.

1.2. Traditional frameworks of attitude

The following are two commonly used theories, the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and its extension, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), designed to explain the relationship between attitude and behaviour. These theories both conceptualise attitude as a single entity and focus on an attitude towards the performance of a particular behaviour. They are based on the notion that consequences of actions and behaviour are contemplated before the completion of that behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen, 1985).

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Fishbein, 1967) provides a theoretical framework for the investigation of the relationship between attitudes and behaviour. The framework suggests behaviour can be predicted by attitude, subjective norm and intention (see Fig. 1). The attitude paradigm of the TRA framework refers to attitudes toward the performance of a specific target behaviour. It is vital when using this framework to first understand the target behaviour of interest (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), as this target behaviour forms the object of the attitudinal evaluation. Often when this framework is used to investigate teacher attitudes of students with disabilities, the target behaviour is the teaching, or classroom management of these students. The construct of the attitude is the positive or negative evaluation an individual assigns to the performance of the behaviour (Fishbein, 1967). The second paradigm that is proposed to affect intention, and thus the performance, of the targeted behaviour is the construct of subjective norm. The subjective norm is an individual's perception of the social pressure on them to perform, or not to perform, the target behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

The notion of intention is an indicator of the amount of effort an individual is willing to exert in order to perform the target behaviour. According to the TRA, an individual's intention to perform the target behaviour is a direct predictor of the actual performance of the target behaviour. When using this framework to examine teacher attitudes one must first identify and define the target behaviour before an investigation can take place. As an example, a target behaviour could be the instigation of academic and behavioural accommodations for a student with disabilities. In this instance the only aspect of attitude that would be investigated would be a teacher's positive or negative evaluation of this behaviour (see Fig. 3).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) was developed as an extension of the TRA to include the notion of perceived behaviour control (Ajzen, 1985, 2001). This added paradigm is included in the extended theory as an influence of intention as well as a direct influence on behaviour (see Fig. 2). The perceived behaviour control variable refers to a subjective evaluation by an individual regarding the degree of ease or difficulty of performing the targeted behaviour and often reflects and individual's experiences performing the behaviour and perceived obstacles that may impede the performance of the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). In this model a target behaviour is still required as the object of the attitudes being investigated.

The TRA has difficulty accurately predicting more complex and deliberate behaviours, and assumes that people make rational conscious decisions based on an evaluation of the performance of the behaviour and does not factor in external

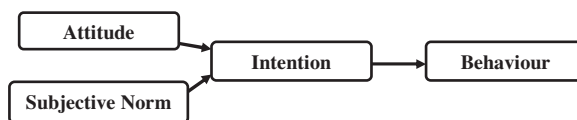


Fig. 1. The Theory of Reasoned Action.

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