Teachers perceived self-efficacy in multicultural classrooms

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Summary

With the increasing diversity in Estonian classrooms (Mets, Viia, 2018; Tammaru et al., 2021), teachers are expected to engage students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and cultivate open attitudes among learners (e.g. Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2020; Irvine, 2003; Sleeter, 2012; Nieto, 2017). TALIS’s (2018) data reveals that only a small number of Estonian teachers feel prepared to cater for diversity. Furthermore, PISA data shows that in Estonia, first-generation immigrant students score lower on the natural science test than their native-born peers (OECD, 2016). Different researchers have posited that such differences come from incapability to engage students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Irvine, 2003; Cummins, 1996; Crawford, 2000).

A key belief associated with academic success, good classroom climate (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2019; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007) and the teacher’s willingness to implement innovative strategies (Ross & Bruce, 2007) is teachers’ self-efficacy. This article focuses on the perceived self-efficacy of Estonian basic school teachers in a multicultural classroom. A multicultural classroom can be defined in very different ways (e.g. based on linguistic, cultural, gender, socio-economic diversity and special needs) (Banks, 2017). The focus of this article is on cultural diversity. Multicultural self-efficacy is the teacher’s perceived ability to use various strategies and activities to influence learners and achieve the desired outcome in a multicultural classroom (Choi & Lee, 2020). This includes the following dimensions: (1) teacher’s beliefs about their ability to relate the experiences, knowledge and perspectives of students from different cultural backgrounds to teaching and learning; (2) teachers’ beliefs on creating a safe classroom environment and (3) teacher’s beliefs on raising students’ awareness about diversity (Romijn et al., 2020, Siwatu, 2007). Teachers’ multicultural self-efficacy has been associated with students’ academic success (Garcia & Chun, 2016; Dee & Penner, 2017) and social and

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cultural empowerment (Gutstein, 2003; Milner, 2011; Rodriguez et al., 2004). Multicultural self-efficacy is considered an evolving concept (Choi & Mao, 2021) that has not been studied in the Estonian context. This study aims to understand what factors shape teacher self-efficacy in a multicultural classroom and what are the challenges and strategies for teachers in a multicultural classroom. The study is a valuable resource for school leaders, policymakers, and teacher education institutions in supporting teachers in a multicultural classroom.

The central research questions of the article are: (1) How do teachers perceive their multicultural self-efficacy; (2) What factors support their multicultural self-efficacy; (3) What are the challenges for teachers in a multicultural classroom; (4) What strategies do teachers use to engage students from diverse cultural backgrounds? The article is based on the data of interviews with Estonian teachers (N = 20), which have been analysed using the method of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2002).

Most teachers perceived their self-efficacy in a multicultural classroom to be high. Teachers considered it essential to make an effort to involve learners from different cultural backgrounds and to create a safe classroom environment. However, much less attention was paid to embedding diverse cultural perspectives into teaching strategies and raising the awareness of diversity among all students. Thus, according to the concept of multicultural self-efficacy (Romijn et al., 2020; Siwatu, 2007), teachers did not reflect all the dimensions of self-efficacy in their interviews. The emphasis of teachers was on general involvement, and only a few teachers integrated the student’s heritage culture and perspectives into teaching and learning. According to the relationships and creating a safe classroom environment, the more experienced teachers in particular reflected this dimension of their self-efficacy. The third dimension of self-efficacy – raising awareness of diversity among all learners – was more evident in the practices of teachers with high self-efficacy.

Although in the TALIS survey (Meesak, 2019), 95% of Estonian school leaders estimated that their school teachers would agree that it is essential to consider differences in students’ cultural backgrounds, our findings suggest that teachers do not incorporate culture into learning. Only a few teachers reflected on integrating students’ heritage culture into teaching. Mostly the teaching strategies were aimed at supporting language competence, creating a safe classroom environment and involving the student through active learning methods. Although teachers with higher self-efficacy perceived their role in raising students’ awareness about diversity, many teachers instead focused on the similarities of the student body than on cultural differences. They felt this would help prevent bullying and discriminatory attitudes in the classroom.
However, a culture-blind attitude does not have an empowering effect on students from different cultural backgrounds (Nieto, 2004; Banks et al., 2001) and is one of the reasons why immigrant students have lower learning outcomes (Crawford, 2000; Howard – Hamilton, 2000).

Similarly, the RITA report (Kitsnik, Kirss, & Pedaste, 2019) states that teachers do not consider the diversity of the student body sufficiently. Therefore, it is crucial to introduce teachers to culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002) or culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) which, according to our study, is not yet reflected in the teachers’ vocabulary. However, its features can be found in the description of teaching strategies. It is imperative to understand the role of culture in the learning process and acknowledge the central role of schools and teachers in shaping the values of diversity and openness within the society. Intercultural workshops, valuing multilingualism and heritage culture, various cultural festivals and seminars and introducing multiple perspectives without criticism are some of the good practices applied in schools.

Both teachers with high and low self-efficacy felt similar challenges, but teachers with higher self-efficacy were more willing to deal with them. The biggest challenge for teachers was the language barrier and lack of time or materials. The latter has also been emphasised by Trasberg and Kond (2017). Differences in worldview, lack of teachers’ psychological skills and burnout also posed challenges.

Experience, collaborative school culture, and open and empathetic attitudes emerged as factors influencing self-efficacy. Here, the authors would like to emphasise the importance of school culture, which can potentially impact other elements. Supporting cooperation, open communication and valuing diversity are key factors that should be addressed within a school community. Teaching in a multicultural classroom places new requirements, and they need the support of both management and support professionals. It is essential to enable teachers who teach in multicultural classrooms to share experiences. As Slabina and Aava (2019) emphasise, the systematic empowerment of teachers increases their self-efficacy, and sharing experiences is vital to adopt changes. It would be helpful to map the activities and expectations of teachers within a specific school community and emphasise the importance of involving all students, which in our study were not felt by teachers with low self-efficacy.

Teacher training should focus on developing a teacher’s psychological competencies to support students with trauma and culture shock, create an open and empathetic attitude, and establish positive contact with students from other cultural backgrounds. In addition to training, it is valuable to provide teachers with international placements. The study found that teachers who have lived abroad value the impact of this experience on their multicultural
self-efficacy. Similarly, McAllister and Irvine (2002) have pointed to the importance of experiencing how to be a member of a non-dominant culture.

Although the majority of teachers who participated in the study appeared to have higher self-efficacy, it is likely that they joined because they were more open to sharing their experiences. Thus, the results cannot be extrapolated to all the teachers. Nevertheless, the study helps to understand the teachers’ experiences and highlights the challenges faced in multicultural classrooms. The study is a valuable resource for supporting the development of teacher self-efficacy in a multicultural classroom. The mixed research design, including the application of the observation method in further research, would make it possible to analyse the connections between the teacher’s perceived self-efficacy and the strategies applied in everyday practice.

Keywords: multicultural classroom, teachers’ multicultural self-efficacy, teaching strategies in multicultural classrooms.