Chapter 5

Teachers’ Capacities to Meet Students’ Additional Support Needs

Bruggink, M., Goei, S. L., & Koot, H. M. (submitted). Teachers’ capacities to meet students’ additional support needs.
Abstract

Mainstream primary teachers generally acknowledge the need to implement adaptive teaching; however, meeting a variety of students’ needs is a challenge. Studies addressed the conditions under which teachers attribute their (in)capacities, but these mainly involved vignettes. Therefore, it remains unknown whether teachers are capable of meeting their own students’ needs and what is of help or hindrance to them. Recent research indicates that teachers distinguish between four dimensions of students’ additional support needs. The current study on 108 Dutch teachers addresses teacher-perceived (in)capacities to meet their students’ needs and perceived sources of help or hindrance in meeting them. Teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs were expected to partly explain teachers’ capacity. Results show that teachers feel fairly adequate in meeting students’ needs. They discern four sources of help or hindrance to which teachers attribute their success. Attributions at the teacher and school levels were mostly related to teacher-perceived capacities, in contrast to teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs.

Introduction

Mainstream primary school teachers generally recognise the need to implement adaptive teaching in their classrooms (Silva & Morgado, 2004). Primary school teachers aim to differentiate their teaching content, pace, level, access, response, sequence, structure, allocated time, needed teaching style and grouping (Adami, 2004). This differentiation aims to account for learning related factors such as students’ gender, intelligence, parental contribution, social background, learning style, metacognition and motivation. However, meeting a variety of students’ needs is a major challenge for many mainstream teachers (Humphrey et al., 2006; Lebeer et al., 2010; Talmor et al., 2005; Tomlinson et al., 2003). Smit and Humpert (2012) found that primary and secondary school teachers do differentiate tasks or goals and adjust available time for the number of tasks to perform. However, this practice mostly occurs as an occasional add-on to regular instruction, rather than on a daily basis. Thus, there is concern whether teachers are indeed able to meet a variety of students’ additional support needs and, as a result, if these needs are sufficiently catered to in classrooms (Mowat, 2009; Van der Veen et al., 2010).

Teachers share these concerns about their ability to meet students’ additional support needs. A survey study identified the concerns of 228 regular class teachers in Australia who have all been involved with the inclusion of a child with an intellectual disability in their classrooms (Forlin, Keen, & Barrett, 2008). Results of this study suggest that concerns may arise from student characteristics, difficulties or problems regarding students’ motivation, problem behaviour, short attention span, inappropriate social skills and limited speech. Professional competency issues were the other major concern of teachers, as also observed in previous work.
(Forlin, 2001), including insufficient pre-service training to cater adequately to students’ needs. For example, O’Gorman and Drudy (2010) studied 642 Irish teachers and found that the majority of teachers’ requests for professional development in inclusion focused on supporting current practices insofar as they prioritised training in types of learning difficulty, assessment techniques and teaching strategies. A survey study on the views of 77 primary teachers in Australia and Wales showed that their top three concerns were lack of time, need for constant close supervision of the student, and balancing demands of child with those of the entire class (Westwood & Graham, 2003). In Portugal, a survey study among 430 primary teachers showed that more than 85% of teachers perceive that not enough resources are available to teach students with learning and/or behaviour problems (Lopes et al., 2004). Vignette studies in Australia, China and Greece (Ho, 2004; Mavroupulou, & Padeliadu, 2002) showed that teachers attributed their shortcomings in adaptive teaching to student- and family-related, rather than teacher- or school-related factors.

Although the studies cited above indicate perceived limitations in teachers’ capacity to meet their students’ additional support needs and possible sources influencing these capacities, most of these studies were performed using hypothetical cases or studied general concerns of teachers towards adaptive teaching or inclusive education. It is still unknown how teachers perceive their capacities to meet the needs for additional support of individual students in their own classrooms.

**Dimensions of Students’ Additional Support Needs**

Recent research (Bruggink et al., 2014) indicates that teachers reliably distinguish between four dimensions of additional support needs for students in their classrooms, viz. instructional support, (on-task) behavioural support, emotional support and peer support. Moreover, it is unknown to which conditions they attribute perceived (in)capacities to meet their own students’ needs for additional support along specific dimensions.

Therefore, this study addresses teacher-perceived capacities to meet their students’ additional support needs and teachers’ attributions of their success or failure to meet these needs. Teachers rated the additional support needs for their own students and their capacities to meet these needs in each of these dimensions. The first research question of this study concerns along which dimensions teachers felt the strongest limitations in capacities. As teachers are traditionally trained mainly to meet instructional needs, one might expect that teachers would perceive lower capacity especially in those dimensions for which they received less training such as providing emotional support and peer support for their students. Moreover, one might expect that those
who received advanced training (e.g., at the master’s level) would rate themselves as more capable than those with more basic training (e.g., at the bachelor’s level).

Sources of Help or Hindrance in Meeting Students’ Needs

Next, to describe along which dimensions teachers feel themselves to be more or less capable of meeting identified needs, it is important to obtain a view on the potential sources of help or hindrance in meeting these needs as this might steer efforts to improve teachers’ capacities. Based on previous studies, teacher attitudes and concerns regarding inclusive education (Avramidis et al., 2000; De Boer et al., 2011; Rose, 2001) was expected to be related to aspects regarding the teacher him/herself (e.g., knowledge of special needs), as well as the classroom (e.g., available materials), the student (e.g., the students’ emotional development) and school / working conditions (e.g., available budget). This study explores each of these attributions.

In addition, teachers’ attributions of success or failure to meet specific students’ needs for support could be largely a reflection of or heavily influenced by, their generalised feelings of efficacy as a teacher - their judgment of their capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Sharma et al. (2012) even state that high teacher efficacy is a key ingredient for inclusive classrooms. Indeed, teachers’ self-efficacy demonstrated to be positively related to teachers’ efforts to improve students’ performance levels (Geogriou et al., 2002), their use of helping strategies (Almog et al., 2007) and negatively to incidents regarding students’ social rejection, shyness and passive-aggressive behaviour (Hutzler et al., 2005). Moreover, Woolfson and Brady (2009; Brady & Woolfson, 2008) found that (when compared to teachers with low self-efficacy) teachers with high self-efficacy attributed students’ problems more often to curriculum and teaching and also regarded students themselves as having more control over their problems. These findings suggest that teachers’ perceptions of their capacities of meeting students’ additional support needs could be influenced by their overall self-efficacy beliefs. Therefore, this study tests whether teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs explain teachers’ perceived (in)capacity to meet their students’ additional support needs next to specific attributions for failure or success.

Study’s Aims and Research Questions

Focusing on mainstream primary school teachers, this study aims to explore the teacher-perceived capacity to meet their students’ additional support needs along four dimensions of
needs and its relationships with teachers’ level of training and years of experience. Based on aforementioned previous studies, it is expected that teachers experience a general incapacity to meet their students’ additional support needs. However, we expected that teachers with a higher level of training (i.e., a master in special educational needs) would experience this incapacity to a lesser extent. Given that teachers are mainly trained to meet instructional needs, we expected that teachers experience less incapacity to meet these needs compared to needs regarding the emotional, behavioural and social support dimensions.

Second, the study addresses teachers’ attributions for their success meeting their students’ additional support needs. Based on previous studies on inclusive education we expected that several sources would be mentioned, including the teacher him/herself (e.g., knowledge of special needs), as well as resources within the classroom (e.g., available materials), characteristics of the student (e.g., the students' motivation) and school / working conditions (e.g., available budget). We expected that teacher-perceived capacity to meet their students’ needs would be attributed to each of these sources.

The third aim of this study is to test to what extent teacher’s perceived capacities to meet their students’ needs are a reflection of their overall self-efficacy beliefs and whether these beliefs would add to the other attributions in explaining their perceived capacities.

Method

Respondents

A total of 108 Dutch mainstream primary school teachers, who were in the last semester of their Bachelor of Education studies (67%) or were studying for a master’s degree in special educational needs (24%) at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences in Zwolle, the Netherlands, volunteered to take part in the study (95% female; mean age 28, range 19-59; mean years of experience 5, range 1 – 32). The teachers were recruited during a compulsory course on defining students’ additional support needs. Data collection took place from May to July 2012 and from September to December 2012. The teachers were teaching students aged 8-12 years.

Procedures

To select teacher-identified students with additional support needs, teachers were asked through a survey, “Which of your students are in need of additional support to achieve set educational goals?” It was made clear that educational goals could pertain to a specific academic
subject but also to a student’s social, emotional or behavioural development. Subsequently, two students per teacher were randomly selected from the nominated students as targets for additional teacher ratings \((n = 216; 67.8\% \text{ male})\). The survey also included questions regarding students’ attainment scores in mathematics and comprehensive reading and about any known diagnoses. Approximately one-third of the selected students were scoring above the national average in mathematics (39.2%) and comprehensive reading (29.7%), and 38% of the students had a formal diagnosis. Teachers also provided information on their own level of training and years of experience.

**Measures**

**Additional Support Needs.** Teachers scored their perceptions of additional support needs of each of the two selected students, using the Teachers’ Perceptions of Students’ Additional Support Needs Questionnaire (TSAN) comprising four very reliable (sub)scales (Bruggink, et al., 2014). Using five-point items (very inapplicable - very applicable), this questionnaire taps four broad dimensions of students’ additional support needs including ‘instructional support needs’ (30 items; e.g., “one strategy to solve a problem”; \(\alpha = .93\)), ‘(on-task) behavioural support needs’ (20 items; e.g., “set boundaries”; \(\alpha = .95\)), ‘emotional support needs’ (12 items; e.g., “increase of self-confidence”; \(\alpha = .86\)) and ‘peer support needs’ (11 items; e.g., “other students who are accepting different or odd behaviour”; \(\alpha = .86\)). All given \(\alpha\)’s are obtained within this study.

**Sources for Help or Hindrance When Addressing Students’ Needs.** No instruments were available to measure teachers’ perceptions of what is of help or hindrance to them when trying to meet their students’ additional support needs along the four stated dimensions. Therefore, 48 items on a five-point scale (1: very hindering - 5: very helping) reflecting attributions for failure or success were developed, inspired by previous studies on teacher attitudes and concerns regarding inclusive education (Avramidis et al., 2000; De Boer et al., 2011; Rose, 2001). Exploratory factor analysis (principal components analysis with varimax rotation) yielded four factors: teacher-level (11 items; e.g., “my skills to provide direct instruction”; \(\alpha = .81\)), classroom-level (9 items; e.g., “number of students in the classroom”; \(\alpha = .81\)), student-level (6 items; e.g., “students’ emotional development”; \(\alpha = .78\)) and school-level (4 items; e.g., “support from colleagues”; \(\alpha = .70\)) factors.

**Teachers’ Self-Efficacy Beliefs.** Teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs were measured using the Dutch version (Goei et al., 2011) of the Ohio State Teacher Efficacy Scale (OSTES, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). This Dutch version was obtained via forward and backward translation procedures. The OSTES is a 24-item questionnaire assessing teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs on a 9-
point scale ranging from 1 (never applicable) to 9 (often applicable). Items are ordered in three scales: efficacy in student engagement (8 items; e.g., “How much can you do to get through to the most difficult students?”; α = .76), efficacy in instructional strategies (8 items; e.g., “How well can you respond to difficult questions from your students?”; α = .84), and efficacy in classroom management (8 items; e.g. “How well can you establish routines to keep activities running smoothly?”; α = .91). All presented reliability values were obtained within this study.

**Statistical Analyses**

Mean differences between teacher-perceived capacities to meet students’ additional support needs along the four dimensions were tested using MANCOVA with the variables level of training, years of experience and the dummy variable ‘teacher’ as covariates. This dummy was used to account for the fact that each teacher scored their capacity for two different students; a value of (0) was assigned for teacher-perceived capacity regarding student one, and a value of (1) was assigned for teacher-perceived capacity regarding student two. Correlations between perceived capacities and years of teaching experience were calculated using Pearson’s correlations.

Associations between teachers’ perceived capacities and their attributions for success and failure and between their perceived capacities and self-efficacy beliefs were tested using Pearson correlations.

To test to what extent teacher-perceived capacity to meet students’ needs are explained by teacher’s self-efficacy beliefs next to their attributions for specific sources of help or hindrance, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used, controlling for years of experience, level of training and the dummy variable ‘teacher’. These three variables were added in the first step, whereas in the second step, teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs (three subscales) and teachers’ attributions (four subscales) were entered.

**Results**

**Teachers’ Self-Perceived Capacity to Meet Students’ Additional Support Needs**

Table 5.1 presents mean item scores of teacher-perceived capacity to meet students’ needs on each of the four dimensions. The MANCOVA indicated significant differences in teacher-perceived capacities across the four dimensions of students’ needs (Wilks’ Lambda = .78, $F(3, 202) = 6.43, p < .001, n^2 = .09$).
Table 5.1 Teachers’ Self-Perceived Capacities to Meet Dimensions of Students’ Additional Support Needs by Teachers’ Characteristics

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<td>Bachelor of Education</td>
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<td>3.53 (0.63)</td>
<td>3.76 (0.58)</td>
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<td>Teachers’ Attributions</td>
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<td>Teacher-level</td>
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<td>School-level</td>
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<td>Instructional Strategies</td>
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<td>Classroom Management</td>
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* p < .05. ** p < .01
Teacher-perceived capacity to meet emotional support was significantly \((p < .001)\) higher than self-perceived capacity to meet instructional support needs, behavioural support needs and self-perceived capacity to meet peer support needs \((p < .001)\). None of the other possible comparisons between the different dimensions yielded significant differences. Table 5.1 shows mean self-perceived capacity scores by level of training. No significant differences in teacher-perceived capacities to meet students’ additional support needs for teachers with a bachelor’s versus master’s level of training.

Significant correlations were found between teachers’ years of experience and capacity to meet students’ instructional support needs \((r = .33)\) as well as their emotional support needs \((r = .18)\).

**Teachers’ Attributions: What are Helping or Hindering Factors?**

Teachers attributed their capacities to meet their students’ needs to each of the four factors of help or hindrance. Mean item scores (1, 2: \(\text{very} \) hindering, 3: not hindering, not helping, 4, 5: \(\text{very} \) helping) indicated positive attributions at the teacher level \((M = 4.04, SD = 0.44)\), classroom level \((M = 3.42, SD = 0.67)\), student level \((M = 3.06, SD = 0.79)\) and school level (Bachelor, \(M = 3.78, SD = 0.55)\).

Table 5.1 presents Pearson correlations between teachers’ attributions for failure or success and teacher-perceived capacity to meet students’ additional support needs. Teachers’ attributions on the teacher-level showed significant relationships with teacher-perceived capacity to meet students’ needs for instructional support \((r = .44)\), behavioural support \((r = .21)\), emotional \((r = .37)\) and peer support \((r = .19)\). No significant relationships were found between teachers’ attributions on the classroom-level and teacher-perceived capacity to meet students’ additional support needs. A significant correlation \((r = -.27)\) was found between teacher attributions at the student-level and teachers’ capacity to meet students’ emotional support needs. Teachers’ attributions at the school-level showed significant correlations with teacher-perceived capacity to meet students’ needs for instructional support \((r = .28)\), behavioural support \((r = .28)\) and emotional support \((r = .20)\).

**Effects of Self-Efficacy and Attributions on Teacher-Perceived Capacity**

To test whether teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs had an effect on their perceived capacity to meet students’ additional support needs in addition to their attributions for help or hindrance, multiple regression analyses were conducted (see Table 5.2).
Table 5.2  Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Self-Perceived Capacity to Meet Dimensions of Teacher-perceived Students’ Additional Support Needs

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<td>Teachers’ Self-Efficacy Beliefs</td>
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* p < 0.05
** p < 0.01
Note. Control variables included teachers’ years of experience, level of training and the dummy variable ‘teacher’.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. 
Correlations among the four attribution scales and the three self-efficacy belief scales were weak to moderate, $r = .01$ to $.57$. The variables years of experience, level of training and the dummy variable ‘teacher’ were entered in step 1 as covariates. In step 2, all predicting variables (i.e., three teachers’ self-efficacy scales and four teachers’ attributions scales) were included.

**Instructional Support Needs.** The model for instructional support needs in step 2 was statistically significant ($F(10,79) = 3.58; \ p = .00$) and explained 31% of variance in teachers’ perceived capacity to meet students’ additional instructional support needs. Teachers’ attributions for help or hindrance on the teacher level ($\beta = .36, \ p = .00$) and school level ($\beta = .24, \ p = .02$) were significant positive predictors. None of the teacher self-efficacy scales contributed to the model.

**(On-Task) Behavioural Support Needs.** The model for behavioural support in step 2 was statistically significant ($F(10,79) = 2.25; \ p = .02$) and explained 22% of variance in teachers’ perceived capacity to meet students’ additional (on-task) behavioural support needs. Teachers’ attributions to sources of help or hindrance on the teacher level ($\beta = .26, \ p = .02$) and school-level ($\beta = .27, \ p = .01$) were significant positive predictors, whereas teachers’ attributions on the student level was a negative predictor ($\beta = -.30, \ p = .00$). None of the teacher self-efficacy scales added to the model.

**Emotional Support Needs.** The model for emotional support needs in step 2 was statistically significant ($F(10,79) = 2.47; \ p = 0.01$) and explained 24% of variance in teachers’ perceived capacity to meet students’ additional emotional support needs. Teachers’ attributions to sources of help or hindrance on the teacher level ($\beta = .35, \ p = .00$) and school level ($\beta = .21, \ p = .047$) were significant predictors of teacher-perceived capacity. Teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs in engaging students predicted teacher-perceived capacity to meet students’ additional emotional support needs ($\beta = .28, \ p = .00$). None of the other self-efficacy scales contributed to the model.

**Peer Support Needs.** The model for peer support needs in step 2 was not statistically significant ($F(10,79) = .64; \ p = .78$); none of the included variables predicted teacher-perceived capacity.

**Discussion**

This study explored Dutch mainstream primary school teachers’ perceptions of their capacity to meet four dimensions of students’ additional support needs. Average teacher-rated capacities to meet the needs of their own students ranged from 3.51 to 3.88 on a five-point scale, indicating that teachers feel reasonably competent to meet additional needs. Unexpectedly,
teachers perceived themselves as the most capable of meeting students’ emotional needs, rather than their instructional needs. Teacher-perceived capacity to meet students’ additional emotional support was significantly higher than teacher-perceived capacity to meet students’ instructional support needs, behavioural support needs and peer support needs. Teacher-perceived capacities did not differ by level of teacher training, in contrast to our expectations. However, perceived capacity to meet instructional support and emotional support needs showed weak positive associations with years of teacher experience. Thus, these capacities appear to be somewhat enhanced over a teacher’s career.

The second aim of this study was to identify perceived sources of help or hindrance in meeting students’ additional support needs, as these sources may be relevant when focusing on the improvement of teacher potential. The sources of help or hindrance encountered by teachers were clearly clustered in four factors: teacher-level, classroom-level, student-level, school-level factors. The attributions explored in this study were observed to be fairly specific and likely related to focusing on specific students. Mean attributions ranged from 3.06 at the student level to 4.04 at the teacher level, indicating that teachers who feel relatively competent attribute this competence primarily to their own resources. Correlations of these attributions with their perceived capacities indeed showed positive associations with both the teacher-level and school-level factors for virtually all need domains. One negative correlation showed that difficulty meeting students’ additional behavioural support needs was perceived to be related to factors at the student level.

The third aim of this study was to test to what extent teacher’s perceived capacities to meet their students’ needs are a reflection of teachers’ overall self-efficacy beliefs and whether these beliefs would add to the other attributions in explaining their perceived capacities. It was expected that teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs have an effect on teacher-perceived capacity to meet students’ additional support needs. However, we hardly found any evidence that general teacher self-efficacy beliefs account for their self-perceived capacities. This result is remarkable because in previous studies teacher self-efficacy beliefs were associated with better treatment for students who face difficulties, more effort to improve students’ low performance level (Georgiou et al., 2002) and providing helping strategies (Almog et al., 2007). Only self-efficacy in engaging students was related to students’ emotional support needs after accounting for associations with specific attributions. This result implies that teacher-perceived capacity to meet students’ additional support needs is student- and/or context-specific, rather than dependent on general teacher self-efficacy beliefs. The value of focusing these general beliefs when addressing specific aspects of teaching in mainstream classrooms is therefore being put into question. This finding is
in line with results that suggest that general teacher self-efficacy beliefs could differ from more context-specific self-efficacy beliefs regarding, for instance, a specific academic subject (Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2007) or particular group of students (Romi & Leyser, 2006). This study addressed teacher-perceived capacity to meet additional support needs of students. Hence, it could be that general self-efficacy beliefs are not specific enough to reflect teachers’ capacity to meet the needs of this particular group of students.

To conclude, Dutch mainstream primary teachers perceive themselves to be fairly capable of meeting students’ additional support needs although least so when trying to meet peer and behavioural support needs, regardless of their level of training. Teachers’ own competencies (i.e., teacher-level) are perceived as being helping in addressing all dimensions of students’ additional support needs. Factors at the school level are observed to help in three out of four dimensions, and factors at the student level are observed to be hindrances when trying to meet students’ behavioural support needs. These sources of help or hindrance are likely to be more important when aiming to improve teacher’s capacities to meet students’ additional support needs than when aiming to improve teachers’ general self-efficacy beliefs.

Although this study has improved our understanding of every-day Dutch mainstream primary teachers’ practices with respect to meeting additional support needs of real students rather than hypothetical cases, it also has some limitations. The study’s sample of teachers and students was relatively small. This study did not involve observations; thus, whether perceived (in)capacities to meet students’ needs are also reflected in practice remains uncertain.

Nevertheless, this study contributed to our understanding of teacher-perceived capacity to meet students’ additional support needs on four different dimensions of support within mainstream classrooms. Its results emphasise the importance of specific work context at the teacher and school levels when aiming to enhance teachers’ capacities to meet students’ additional support needs. These findings are relevant for educational policy and teacher training because identifying and meeting students’ additional support needs forms an important part of the complex tasks of today’s mainstream teachers in primary education.