



Differences in levels of optimism and job satisfaction between mainstream educators and special educators

Sandhya Girish^{1*}, Diana Niveditha²

¹A Level Student, APL Global School, Chennai - 600097 2

²Teacher, Faculty of Psychology, APL Global School, Chennai - 600097, E-mail: diananiveditha@apl.edu.in

***Corresponding Author :** Sandhya Girish

*E-mail: sandhyagirish@apl.edu.in / sandhyagirish47@gmail.com

Citation: Sandhya Girish (2024), Differences in levels of optimism and job satisfaction between mainstream educators and special educators, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(11), 232 - 238

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i11.8441

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Optimism and job satisfaction play an important role for educators and for almost any working professional. This research aims to investigate whether there is a difference in levels of optimism and job satisfaction between mainstream and special educators. The primary data was collected from 49 educators, including 32 mainstream educators and 17 special educators, from different educational institutions in India. Levene's test was used to test equal variances between the two data sets. Independent samples t-test was used to test the difference between levels of optimism and job satisfaction between the two types of educators. The results from the Levene's test and the t-test found that there was no significant difference in levels of optimism and job satisfaction between mainstream and special educators. However, Levene's test showed that certain variables in the JSS with respect to work friends, supervisor competence and interest in subordinates, workplace bureaucracy, and attitude towards the worth of the job itself had a significant difference between both types of educators. Nevertheless, most of these significant differences had a positive implication for special educators in relation to job satisfaction. The practical application of this study aims to identify this difference and help educational institutions improve the specific variables that indicate lower job satisfaction for special educators, as part of positive psychology. This may therefore improve the quality of service provided to special-needs children.

Keywords: Special Educators, Mainstream Educators, Optimism, Job Satisfaction, EducationInstitutes.

Introduction

"The goal of educating children with disabilities is the same as that of educating children without disabilities: to support children in reaching their full potential and leading productive lives as active members of their communities." (Hayes and Bulat, 2017) Optimism is the positive orientation towards the future (Conversano. C et al., 2010). Job satisfaction is defined by Locke as a positive emotional state that results from evaluating one's job or job experiences (Locke, 1976). These factors may affect the way an individual performs at work and their general outlook to life. Optimism is a contributor to mental wellbeing and there is a positive relationship between individual optimism and work performance (Chan, 2002). Moreover, Low job satisfaction affects both mental and physical health as a strong predictor for psychological distress, sleep disorders, headaches and gastro-intestinal problems (Azami S et al., 2015). Hence, it is important for all organisations to ensure their employees rate high on both factors, to improve professional efficiency as well as securing their mental health. The Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R) and Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS) have been used to test for optimism and job satisfaction respectively.

Special educators cater to various students with learning, behavioural and physical disabilities. Their job profile comes with a lot of additional challenges as they have to adapt both mentally and professionally in order to cater to the needs of various children. Moreover, certain disorders like learning difficulties and autism can lead to learned helplessness which may have a long lasting impact on general levels of optimism and job satisfaction

(Katrak and Sunkarapalli, 2021). Previous research has shown that special educators have recorded lower levels of academic optimism (Uzum and Unal 2023). However, there has been limited research to investigate differences in optimism and job satisfaction as a comparative study between mainstream and special educators, especially in the Indian context. This research identifies the research gap in this area and aims to investigate whether there is a difference in levels of optimism and job satisfaction between mainstream educators and special educators. The Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R) and Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS) have been used to test for optimism and job satisfaction respectively.

Literature Review

Special education is defined by the American Psychological Association as specially designed programs, services, and instruction provided to children with learning, behavioural, or physical disabilities (e.g., visual impairment, hearing loss, neurological disorders) to assist them in becoming independent, productive, and valued members of their communities. Teachers need to be equipped with various unique skills and support to satisfy the specific needs of special children. The work environment and educator's attitude greatly impact the quality of education and support provided to these children. Hence, optimism and job satisfaction play a significant role in special education.

There is a relationship between optimism and job satisfaction. Optimism is positively related to employee performance and job satisfaction (Mishra et al., 2016). A literature review on the impact of optimism on mental and physical well-being concluded that optimism heavily influences mental and physical health (Conversano. C et al., 2010). This can be linked to Albert Bandura's social learning theory, where "psychological functioning is best understood in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between behaviour and its controlling conditions (Bandura, 1977). Hence, special children may learn and reproduce behaviour demonstrated by their teachers, which makes it important for them to be consistently optimistic and satisfied with their jobs.

Excess stress and burnout make special educators feel their profession has a negative impact on their quality of life (Hester. O et al., 2020). With the already low number of special educators in India, high occupational stress and low satisfaction lead to increasing attrition. Mockovciak. A et al., 2023 concluded that rising attrition among special educators is due to a lack of autonomy and recognition. Research conducted in Mumbai-based private early childhood schools discussed that special educators feel the main factors to reduce attrition are positive workplace relationships and higher salaries (Menon & Brackin, 2021). Moreover, another research revealed 38% of special educators had low levels of well-being and 49% had above-average occupational stress (Tyagi V, 2021).

Hence this study has been conducted to investigate whether there is any difference in the levels of these two factors between mainstream and special educators. This helps recognise any relative work dissatisfaction or low levels of optimism that may exist among special educators.

Optimism

Optimism describes a positive orientation towards the future (Scheier and Carver 1992). Special educators usually cater to students with learning disabilities, learning difficulties, autism, emotional and behavioural disorders and physical disabilities. These disabilities and disorders are usually not curable and one can only learn how to cope with and manage them effectively. Such indefinite symptoms can lead to excess stress and burnout, thereby hurting the quality of life (Hester. O et al., 2020). It is found that parents of children with neurodevelopmental disorders show comparatively lower levels of optimism and higher levels of learned helplessness (Katrak and Sunkarapalli, 2021). This may be true with special educators too as perpetual intervention and management for these children, with only gradual progress in performance, could increase learned helplessness, reducing their level of optimism compared to mainstream educators. Research on factors affecting academic optimism in secondary schools revealed that teachers feel a higher number of inclusive students in the class reduces academic optimism (Uzum and Unal 2023). They may feel they are not fully equipped to meet the specific needs of the students and may give up on them. Hence, the quality of special education received in inclusive schools may decrease. However, little research has been done on whether there is a difference between levels of optimism between special and mainstream educators and this research aims to investigate the same.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is defined as the pleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job as achieving or facilitating the achievement of one's job values (Locke, 1969). Research in different cultural contexts found special educators to have low job satisfaction. Teachers involved with students in special education programmes were most dissatisfied with their jobs, especially those who were younger and less experienced (Stempien. L et al., 2002). A study on inclusive schools in Kolkata, India revealed that there was a significant difference in job satisfaction between special educators and resource teachers with respect to their genders (Mukhopadhyay. A et al., 2002). However, Cooke. J, 2023 did not find any significant difference in job satisfaction between inclusive special education teachers and collaborative general education teachers while

controlling for a sense of community. This may be due to internal passion and satisfaction from helping students.

Gap In The Literature

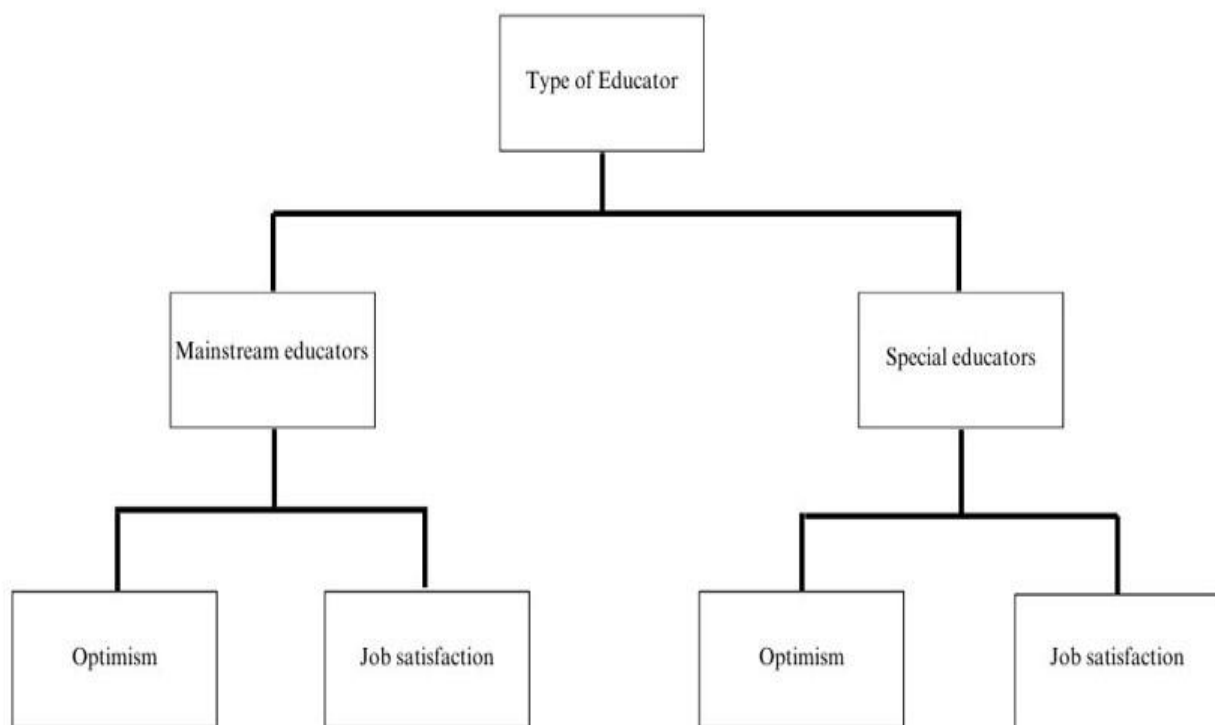
There has been sparse research conducted on measuring the difference in general optimism levels amongst mainstream and special educators, and there has been limited conclusive comparative study conducted for measuring job satisfaction, specific to the Indian context. Based on this research gap, this study aims to investigate this potential difference for the two types of educators in India.

Theoretical Framework

Following the literature review, research gaps were identified, and a theoretical framework addressing job satisfaction and optimism has been presented in Figure 1. It demonstrates how both optimism and job satisfaction could be categorised individually under mainstream and special educators and how there could be a potential difference between the two.

Positive psychology is defined by the American Psychological Association as "a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions promises to improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless." This can be associated with the two variables investigated in this study - optimism and job satisfaction. Optimistic individuals are more likely to have better mental health and higher quality of life (Laranjeira and Querido, 2022). Job satisfaction and subjective well-being have a direct, positive relationship and hence, are correlated with the principles of positive psychology. Mishra et al. (2016) indicates the positive correlation between optimism and job satisfaction and this research bolsters the optimism construct's external validity in the Indian setting in relation to performance and job satisfaction.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



Objectives, Scope and Methodology

The objective aims to investigate whether there is a difference in levels of optimism and job satisfaction between mainstream educators and special educators. This research has specific questions:

Is there a difference in levels of optimism and job satisfaction between mainstream and special educators?

If so, which group of educators demonstrate a lower level of optimism and job satisfaction?

The study proposed the following hypotheses:

H_{01a}: There will be a significant difference in levels of optimism and job satisfaction between mainstream educators and special educators

Ha1a: There will be a no significant difference in levels of optimism and job satisfaction between mainstream educators and special educators

Scope

The study is limited to India as the research conducted on this objective in this geographical location is scarce. Addressing special needs and the concept of inclusivity is constantly evolving in India. There are 3811 special schools and numerous inclusive schools in India. There is no centralised database to record the number of inclusive schools. Optimism improves the effectiveness of service provided by special educators as it increases motivation and encourages a better relationship with the student. Likewise, high job satisfaction reduces burnout due to challenges at work and leads to stronger engagement and lower attrition rates. Since there are many educational institutions in India that cater to special-needs children, research on this subject would be beneficial to both the educators and the students.

Data Source

The data was collected from mainstream and special educators of different specialisations from educational institutions in Chennai and Bangalore. Non- probability sampling techniquevoluntary sampling method was incorporated to collect quantitative data. In total, 49 responses were used in this study, with 32 mainstream educators and 17 special educators. Sample was collected from educators of 21 different institutions primarily in Chennai and Bangalore.

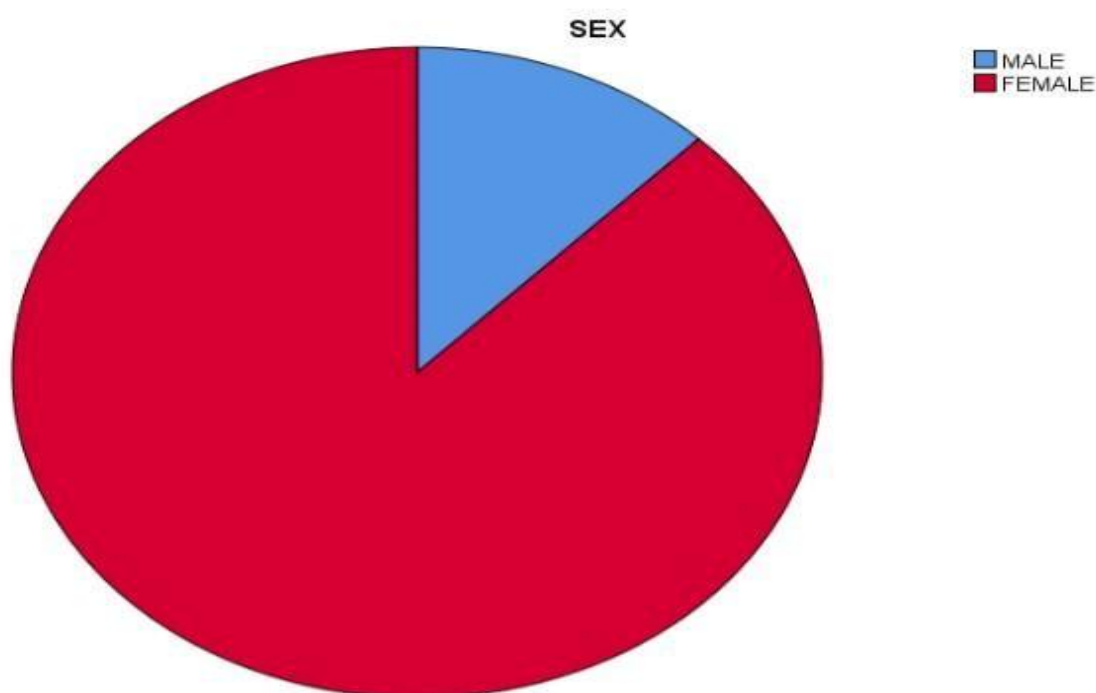
Research Instrument

A structured questionnaire was used for data collection, which was an objective method of interpreting the data. The questionnaire consisted of two scales, one for optimism and job satisfaction each. The Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R), developed by Scheier, Carver, and Bridges in 1994, was used to measure optimism in this study. It is a standardised psychological instrument to measure the dispositional level of optimism. The LOT-R scores high on internal consistency, which has a Cronbach's alpha between 0.75 to 0.85. It has strong construct, convergent and predictive validity which makes it a relatively accurate measure of optimism. It also has a good cross-cultural validity that considers Western, Eastern and non-Western cultures. The Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS) was used to assess job satisfaction. It is a 36 item, nine facet scale that measures various aspects of the job. It has high internal consistency of Cronbach's alpha from 0.70 to 0.90, and high subscale reliability between 0.70 to 0.90. Specifically, the JSS has good discriminant validity that helps differentiate job satisfaction from weaker correlations of job performance and leadership style. The factor analysis for this multidimensional model, that includes nine subscales, measures distinct but related dimensions of job satisfaction. It is also sensitive and specific to different aspects and levels of employment which increases its generalisability.

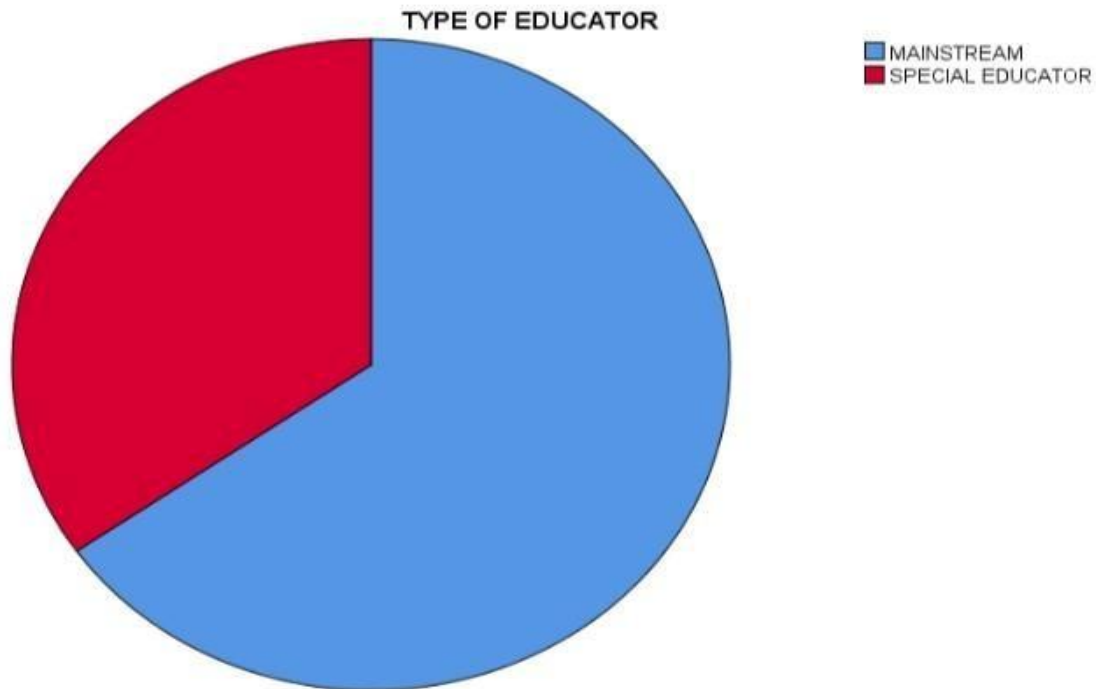
Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

Gender



Type of educator



Independent Samples t-test

On testing the t-test, using the independent samples test for equality of means, no significant levels of difference were found for the two groups - mainstream educators and special educators with significant levels of 0.547 and 0.436 in both job satisfaction and optimism respectively.

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances

This test checks for whether the variances of the two groups are equal. If the Sig. value (p-value) is greater than 0.05, it indicates that the variances are not significantly different, and we assume equal variances. For example, in statement 1 of the LOT-R scale ("In uncertain times, I usually expect the best"), the p-value is 0.462 (> 0.05), so we assume equal variances.

The Levene's independent samples t-test

The Levene's independent samples t-test output assesses differences between two groups on 36 different statements, likely related to workplace perceptions and job satisfaction. However, although there were no significant differences in the group data set, some individual items in the scale showed significance levels. Items such as "I enjoy my friends a lot" (significance level 0.434) which was lower for mainstream educators with mean 3.06 as compared to mean 3.059 for special educators; "My supervisor is quite competent in doing his/her job" (significance level < 0.001) which was lower for special educators with mean 3.59 as compared to mean 4.66 for mainstream educators; "Many of our rules and procedures make doing a good job difficult" (significance level 0.636) which was lower for special educators with mean 3.18 as compared to mean 4.13 for mainstream educators; "I sometimes feel my job is meaningless" (significance level 0.010) which was lower for special educators with mean 1.47 as compared to mean 2.50 for mainstream educators. Furthermore, the item "My supervisor shows too little interest in the feelings of subordinates" is close to significant with significance level < 0.001. This was lower for mainstream educators with mean 2.47 as compared to mean 3.41 for special educators.

Discussion

This study measures optimism and job satisfaction amongst mainstream and special educators and looks at whether there is a difference between both the types of educators with respect to the above stated two variables. The study found that there was no significant difference in levels of optimism and job satisfaction between mainstream educators and special educators. This accepts the null hypothesis that There will be no significant difference in levels of optimism and job satisfaction between mainstream educators and special educators. However, certain items in the JSS were significantly different as identified by the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances. Contrary to previous studies on different job satisfaction levels between different types of educators, four out of five of these items indicate higher job satisfaction for special educators than mainstream educators. This could indicate that special educators are more satisfied with their job. This could be due to the fact that

special educators are more motivated and content with their line of work as the internal motivators may be stronger than for mainstream educators.

However, more research in this line is required to understand specific reasons for these results. Special educators scored lower for the item "My supervisor is quite competent in doing his/her job" which may imply that these educators expect more expertise from their supervisors. This may potentially reduce job satisfaction especially since the significance level for this item in the Levene's test is less than 0.001. Nevertheless, further research is needed to understand the qualitative reasoning behind these differences. The levels of optimism are not significantly different between educators even on an individual analysis of each item.

The limitation of this study is the small sample size which may limit the generalisability of this study. There were 49 participants with only 17 special educators. The sample also mainly comprised female educators. However, these educators came from a range of 21 different educational institutions which gives a good overview of job satisfaction in different workplace environments and job expectations.

Overall, discussions with both mainstream and special educators would help further understand their perceptions of optimism and job satisfaction, thereby improving the practical applications of this study. Educational institutions can also investigate the reason for lower job satisfaction amongst mainstream and educators as well as maintain and improve their work environment in order to keep special educators optimistic and satisfied in order to cope with challenges at work. It should also be taken into consideration that special educators may have low levels of optimism and may be dissatisfied with their job despite scoring similar to mainstream educators. Hence, these institutions must focus on improving these factors to improve work performance and commitment. Further research should explore these factors using a larger, more diverse sample.

Conclusion

This study aims to investigate whether there is a difference in levels of optimism and job satisfaction between mainstream educators and special educators and to understand whether special educators have lower levels of these variables in order to help educational institutions improve these factors for them. With the growing interest and concern to address the needs of special students in India, it is crucial that the service provided to them is of the highest possible quality. Optimism and job satisfaction are two important factors that could affect the work performance of educators as they influence mental well-being through the Positive Psychology principles. The study found no significant difference in levels of optimism and job satisfaction between mainstream educators and special educators, thereby accepting the null hypothesis and rejecting the alternative hypothesis. The Levene's test indicated special educators scored significantly lower under job satisfaction only with regard to opinion on supervisor competence. Educational institutions may aim to improve this aspect for special educators.

To conclude, the study implies that special educators have similar levels of optimism and job satisfaction relative to mainstream educators and hence, they may be as effective as mainstream educators while catering to the needs of special children. Nevertheless, special educators may still need to maintain good levels of optimism and job satisfaction beyond their internal motivators as although they are not significantly different from mainstream educators, they still might be pessimistic or dissatisfied with their job.

References

1. Aazami, S. (2015). The Relationship Between Job Satisfaction and Psychological/Physical Health among Malaysian Working Women. PubMed Central.
2. A, M., & Magdalin, S. (2019). Burnout and self-efficacy among special education teachers. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 7(4). doi:10.25215/0704.037
3. Ari, M., & Sipal, R. F. (2009). Factors affecting job satisfaction of Turkish Special Education Professionals: Predictors of turnover. *European Journal of Social Work*, 12(4), 447–463. doi:10.1080/13691450902840648
4. Bandura, A. (n.d.). Albert Bandura's social learning theory. Retrieved from https://www.asecib.ase.ro/mps/Bandura_SocialLearningTheory.pdf
5. Billingsley, B., & Bettini, E. (2019). Special education teacher attrition and retention: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(5), 697–744. doi:10.3102/0034654319862495
7. Chan, F. J. (2003). Examining optimistic personality, work performance, and interpersonal relationships at work. *PsycEXTRA Dataset*. doi:10.1037/e518712013-341
8. Cooke, J. C. (2023). Differences in Job Satisfaction Between Special Educators when Controlling for Sense of Community Liberty University.

10. Conversano, C., Rotondo, A., Lensi, E., Della Vista, O., Arpone, F., & Reda, M. A. (2010). Optimism and its impact on mental and physical well-being. *Clinical Practice & Epidemiology in Mental Health*, 6(1), 25–29. doi:10.2174/1745017901006010025
11. Hayes, A. M., & Bulat, J. (2017). *Disabilities Inclusive Education Systems and Policies Guide for Low- and Middle-Income Countries*. doi:10.3768/rtipress.2017.op.0043.1707
12. Hester, O. R., Bridges, S. A., & Rollins, L. H. (2020). ‘Overworked and underappreciated’: Special education teachers describe stress and attrition. *Teacher Development*, 24(3), 348–365. doi:10.1080/13664530.2020.1767189
13. Katrak, B. K., & Sunkarapalli, G. (2021). Relationship between optimism, resilience and learned helplessness in parents of children with neurodevelopmental disorders. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*. doi:10.25215/0901.122
14. Khosla, & Irene. (2021). Optimism and psychological well-being in Indian adults: Exploring gender and age differences. *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(2).
15. Locke, E. A. (1976). *The Nature and Causes of Job Satisfaction*.
16. Laranjeira, C., & Querido, A. (2022). Hope and optimism as an opportunity to improve the “positive mental health” demand. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2022.827320
17. Manjeet Kaur, Rekha Khosla, & Masood Siddiqui. (2024). Impact of job stress on psychological well-being of teachers. *International Research Journal on Advanced Engineering and Management (IRJAEM)*, 2(03), 504–515. doi:10.47392/irjaem.2024.0071
18. Menon, S. S., & Brackin, D. M. (2021). Educator perspectives on teacher attrition and retention in private early childhood schools in India. *Asian Journal of Advanced Research and Reports*, 13–25. doi:10.9734/ajarr/2021/v15i230363
19. Mockovciak, A. M., McKeithan, G. K., Johnson, X. T., Grisworld, D. E., & Rivera, M. O. (2023). Special education teacher attrition. *Global Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities*, 11(3). doi:10.19080/gjidd.2023.11.555811
20. Mishra, U. S., Patnaik, S., & Mishra, B. B. (2016). Role of optimism on employee performance and job satisfaction. *Prabandhan: Indian Journal of Management*, 9(6), 35. doi:10.17010/pijom/2016/v9i6/94960
21. Mukhopadhyay, A., Sharma, M., Chandan, M., & Dubey, C. K. (2023). Comparative study of level of Job Satisfaction among Special Educators working in Special Schools & Resource Room set up in Inclusive schools of Kolkata, West Bengal. *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education*. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.48047/intjecse/V14I3.1316
22. Reed, D. (2016). Coping with occupational stress: The role of optimism and coping flexibility. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, 71. doi:10.2147/prbm.s97595
23. Robinson, O. P., Bridges, S. A., Rollins, L. H., & Schumacker, R. E. (2019). A study of the relation between Special Education Burnout and job satisfaction. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 19(4), 295–303. doi:10.1111/1471-3802.12448
24. Scheier, M. F., Carver, C. S., & Bridges, M. W. (1994). Distinguishing optimism from neuroticism (and trait anxiety, self-mastery, and self-esteem): A reevaluation of the Life Orientation Test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67(6), 1063–1078. doi:10.1037//0022-3514.67.6.1063
25. of Personality and Social Psychology, 67(6), 1063–1078. doi:10.1037//0022-3514.67.6.1063
26. Seligman, M. E., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5–14. doi:10.1037/0003-066x.55.1.5
27. Spector, P. E. (1985). Measurement of Human Service Staff Satisfaction: Development of the job satisfaction survey. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 13(6), 693–713. doi:10.1007/bfo0929796
28. Stempien, L. R., & Loeb, R. C. (2002). Differences in job satisfaction between General Education and Special Education Teachers. *Remedial and Special Education*, 23(5), 258–267. doi:10.1177/07419325020230050101
29. Song, K. (2022). Well-being of teachers: The role of efficacy of teachers and academic optimism. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2021.831972
30. Tyagi, V. (2021). Occupational Stress and Wellbeing among Special Educators. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 9(3). doi:10.25215/0704.037
31. ÜZÜM, S., & ÜNAL, A. (2023). Factors affecting teachers’ academic optimism in secondary schools. *Research on Education and Psychology*, 7(1), 15–38. doi:10.54535/rep.1257091
32. Vehkakoski, T. M. (2019). “Can do!” teacher promotion of optimism in response to student failure expectation expressions in classroom discourse. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 64(3), 408–424. doi:10.1080/00313831.2019.1570547