

REVIEW

Teachers' Self-Efficacy beliefs in China: A Literature Review (2015-2025)

Las creencias de autoeficacia de los docentes en China: una revisión de la literatura (2015-2025)

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ABSTRACT

This study reviews literature on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs in China from 2015 to 2025, aiming to identify key trends, influencing factors, and research gaps. Rooted in Bandura's social cognitive theory, it examines how instructional leadership, professional development, classroom management, and student outcomes shape teachers' self-efficacy. Using a systematic literature review, relevant studies were analyzed based on theoretical foundations, methodologies, and findings. Results indicate that educational reforms, regional disparities, and professional expectations significantly impact self-efficacy, with instructional leadership and training playing positive roles, while rural areas face persistent challenges. The discussion highlights policy and practical implications, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and further research on digital education and cultural influences. This review contributes to understanding self-efficacy in China's educational context and provides insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers. Its originality lies in synthesizing recent studies to offer a comprehensive perspective on evolving trends and challenges in teacher self-efficacy.

Keywords: Teacher Self-Efficacy; China; Instructional Leadership; Professional Leadership; Educational Reforms; Regional Disparities; Systematic Review.

RESUMEN

Este estudio revisa la literatura sobre las creencias de autoeficacia de los docentes en China desde 2015 hasta 2025, con el objetivo de identificar tendencias clave, factores influyentes y brechas en la investigación. Basado en la teoría social cognitiva de Bandura, examina cómo el liderazgo instruccional, el desarrollo profesional, la gestión del aula y los resultados estudiantiles influyen en la autoeficacia de los docentes. Mediante una revisión sistemática de la literatura, se analizaron estudios relevantes según sus fundamentos teóricos, metodologías y hallazgos. Los resultados indican que las reformas educativas, las disparidades regionales y las expectativas profesionales impactan significativamente en la autoeficacia, con el liderazgo instruccional y la formación desempeñando un papel positivo, mientras que las áreas rurales enfrentan desafíos persistentes. La discusión destaca las implicaciones políticas y prácticas, enfatizando la necesidad de intervenciones específicas y de una mayor investigación sobre la educación digital y las influencias culturales. Esta revisión contribuye a la comprensión de la autoeficacia en el contexto educativo de China y proporciona información valiosa para formuladores de políticas, educadores e investigadores. Su originalidad radica en la síntesis de estudios recientes para ofrecer una perspectiva integral sobre las tendencias y desafíos en la autoeficacia docente.

Palabras clave: Autoeficacia Docente; China; Liderazgo Instruccional; Liderazgo Profesional; Reformas Educativas; Disparidades Regionales; Revisión Sistemática.

INTRODUCTION

According to Bandura, educators' confidence, which defines teacher self-efficacy, lies in their capacity to shape student achievement, navigate classroom dynamics, and apply effective teaching methodologies.⁽¹⁾ Rooted in social cognitive theory, self-efficacy acts as a crucial factor shaping educators' behaviors, motivation, as well as endurance within the learning environment.⁽²⁾ Researches consistently show that the teachers who have a strong sense of self-efficacy demonstrate greater adaptability, higher job contentment, as well as a greater ability to adapt innovative teaching strategies, teachers who have poorer self-efficacy, on the other hand, are more likely to feel stressed and burned out, as well as diminished instructional effectiveness.^(3,4)

On a global scale, teacher self-efficacy is shaped by multiple elements, including instructional leadership, ongoing professional training, and effective classroom management techniques.^(5,6) Studies from Western countries emphasize the role of teacher autonomy, collaboration, and institutional support in fostering self-efficacy.⁽⁷⁾ However, China's educational system is shaped by centralized policies, hierarchical school structures, and high societal expectations, teacher self-efficacy exhibits distinct characteristics.⁽⁸⁾

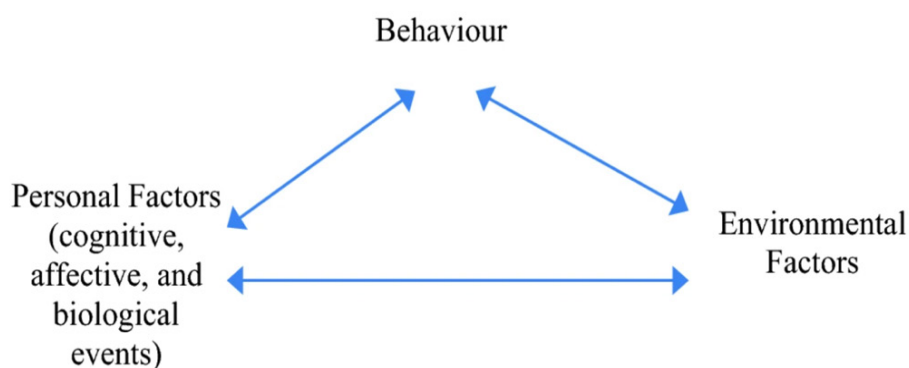
Since 2015, China has introduced several educational reforms aimed at improving teaching quality, reducing workload, and enhancing professional development opportunities.⁽⁹⁾ Educational policy reforms, along with regional inequalities in resource distribution and student outcomes, have played a vital role in moulding the views of teachers on their professional abilities and confidence levels.⁽¹⁰⁾ However, while a growing body of research on teacher self-efficacy in China has grown in the recent ten years, there is still a need for a comprehensive overview that synthesizes key findings and identifies research gaps.

This literature review systematically examines research on teacher self-efficacy in China over the period from 2015 to 2025. The primary objectives of this review are: 1) to identify key trends in studies of teacher self-efficacy in China over the past decade, 2) to explore critical elements in forming teacher self-efficacy, in terms of instructional leadership, professional growth opportunities, and classroom management strategies. 3) To explore regional and contextual differences in teacher self-efficacy across urban and rural areas. 4) To analyze the impact of educational reforms and policy changes on teacher self-efficacy in China. 5) This study aims in finding out the gaps of existing papers as well as suggesting prospective areas for research in the future. Through these objectives, this review seeks towards a deeper understanding on teacher self-efficacy in Chinese educational settings, offering valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers.

Theoretical framework

Notion about teacher self-efficacy is derived from social cognitive theory of Bandura.⁽¹¹⁾ The theory highlights the influence of self-belief on human agency. It reveals the personal self-confidence in one's ability to perform a given assignment effectively. In the educational setting, teacher self-efficacy refers that teachers believe that they have the ability to influence student learning, manage the classroom environment, and adjust to instructional challenges.⁽¹²⁾ Increased self-efficacy was associated with increased job satisfaction and adoption of innovative teaching methods, and greater resilience in overcoming challenges.⁽¹³⁾

Bandura's triadic reciprocal determinism model explains self-efficacy as a result of the continuous interaction among three key elements: (1) Personal factors, including teachers' beliefs, emotions, and prior experiences; (2) Behavioral factors, for example instructional methods and professional development; (3) Environmental factors, encompassing school leadership, student demographics, and institutional policies. The framework of this research offers valuable insights into the dual influence of both psychological (internal) and contextual (external) factors on teacher self-efficacy. Educators whose self-efficacy is high were more likely in employing learner-orientated pedagogical practices, demonstrate resilience in overcoming challenges, and effectively manage classroom discipline.



Source: Adapted from Bandura 1997, p. 6

Figure 1. Bandura's triadic reciprocal determinism model

Various theoretical models have been developed to conceptualize and assess teacher self-efficacy. Tschannen-Moran et al proposed an omnibus version of the model emphasising the periodicity of beliefs about efficacy. The model indicates a variety of sources from which teachers' self-efficacy is shaped, including mastery experiences (previous successful teaching encounters), vicarious experiences (learning through observing capable peers), verbal persuasion (affirmation and support from colleagues and administrators), as well as their physiological and emotional states (stress, anxiety, or confidence). This model highlights the dynamic process through which self-efficacy beliefs evolve, demonstrating that ongoing professional development and positive feedback contribute to sustained efficacy growth. Previous research distinguished between these two aspects regarding teachers' self-efficacy: individual teaching effectiveness reflects their confidence regarding the ability to teach, whereas overall perceived teaching efficacy relates to external beliefs, such as student backgrounds, impact learning outcomes. This model has been widely applied in Chinese studies examining how systemic constraints—such as curriculum policies and testing pressures—affect teacher confidence.⁽¹⁴⁾

While the models above have been extensively studied in Western contexts, Research on teacher self-efficacy in China has gained increasing attention, exploring factors that shape teachers' confidence and instructional effectiveness within the country's unique educational system. Confucian educational philosophy, which emphasizes hierarchy, collective responsibility, and teacher authority, affects how Chinese teachers perceive their role and self-efficacy. Additionally, high-stakes examinations and government-driven educational reforms create a distinctive professional environment where efficacy beliefs are closely tied to policy changes. Studies indicate that instructional leadership significantly influences teacher self-efficacy in China, as school leaders play a vital element in fostering a supportive teaching environment. Principals who provide instructional guidance, encourage collaboration, and offer professional development opportunities significantly enhance teachers' confidence in their abilities. However, rural teachers often face challenges in accessing professional learning communities, limiting opportunities for collaboration and continuous development.

While research on teacher self-efficacy in China has expanded in recent years, there remains a need for a more comprehensive synthesis of key findings and emerging trends. Several gaps and contradictions remain. The first gap is regional disparities in self-efficacy. While urban teachers benefit from extensive training and institutional support, rural teachers face greater challenges due to resource shortages. More research is needed to examine how targeted interventions can bridge this gap.⁽¹⁵⁾ The second gap is impact of digital education. With the rapid expansion of technology in classrooms, studies on the ways in which digital learning tools affect teachers' self-efficacy are limited. Some studies suggest that technology enhances teacher confidence, while others highlight digital anxiety as a barrier.⁽¹⁶⁾ Some researchers argue that self-efficacy is primarily shaped by internal beliefs and personal experiences, while others emphasize the overwhelming influence of external policies and leadership in China's centralized education system. Studies consistently highlight that supportive school leadership is a critical factor in strengthening teacher self-efficacy. Principals who offer mentorship, guidance, professional backing helps boost teachers' confidence and instructional effectiveness, and reduce bureaucratic burdens contribute to higher teacher confidence and effectiveness.

This study's theoretical framework is grounded in Bandura's social cognitive theory, alongside key teacher self-efficacy models that provide insight into the factors shaping educators' confidence and performance, with a focus on the Chinese educational context. While global research provides valuable insights, China's unique cultural and policy-driven environment requires further exploration. By addressing gaps in regional disparities, digital education, and policy influences, this study aims to provide a broader view of teachers' self-efficacy within China.

METHOD

This study conducted a systematic literature review to examine research on teachers' self-efficacy in China between 2015 and 2025. A systematic review approach enhances rigor and transparency in identifying, selecting, and analyzing relevant studies. Adhering to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, the review followed four essential steps: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion.⁽¹⁹⁾

The identification stage involved a comprehensive search across multiple academic databases, including Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, ERIC, CNKI, and Google Scholar (table 1). The search strategy combined key terms such as "teacher self-efficacy," "teacher beliefs," and "teacher efficacy" with geographic indicators like "China" or "Chinese teacher".⁽²⁰⁾ This process retrieved a total of 1765 records. To ensure a comprehensive yet focused dataset, additional searches were conducted in databases such as Taylor & Francis, Wiley, and Science Direct, applying the same criteria.

In the screening phase (figure 1), duplicate records were removed, reducing the dataset to 1240 articles. The remaining articles were screened based on their relevance to teacher self-efficacy in China, leaving 525 records for further eligibility assessment. The eligibility phase involved a detailed review of full-text articles (n

= 350) to determine their alignment with the study's objectives. Ultimately, 82 studies considered appropriate and were included as part of the ultimate review.

| Table 1. The Search result based on different keywords | | | | | |
|--|--|--------|------|------|----------------|
| | WoS | Scopus | ERIC | CNKI | Google Scholar |
| Search Keyword | Article title, Abstract, Keywords ("teacher self-efficacy" OR "teacher beliefs" "teacher efficacy") AND ("China" OR "Chinese teacher") | | | | |
| | 320 | 275 | 180 | 460 | 530 |
| Total | 1765 | | | | |

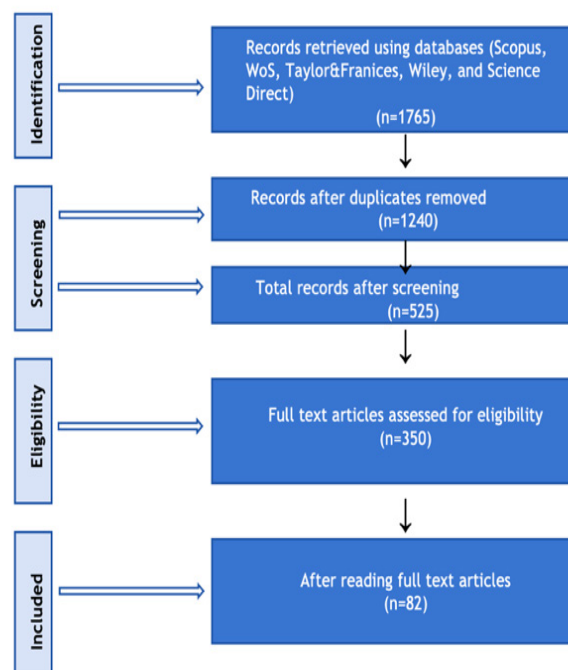


Figure 1. Selection in the PRISMA flow diagram

Inclusion as well as exclusion criteria have been strictly enforced in order to ensure the choice of high-quality studies. Table 2 shows that the eligible studies were empirical research papers that are published in peer-refereed journal, and are in English language, focusing on empirical research articles on teachers' self-efficacy in China from 2015 to 2025. Excluded studies included book chapters, review articles, non-English publications, and studies conducted outside China. This approach aligns with best practices for systematic literature reviews, ensuring that only primary research studies with rigorous methodologies were included.

| Table 2. The exclusion and inclusion criterion | | |
|--|-----------------------------|---|
| Criterion | Eligibility | Exclusion |
| Type of literature | Journal (research articles) | Book, book chapters, book series, journals (review) |
| Language | English | Non-English |
| Timeline | 2015-2025 | < 2015 |
| Countries | China | Non-China |

Data extraction and synthesis followed a thematic analysis approach, identifying key themes and trends in the selected studies. Themes such as factors influencing teacher self-efficacy, its implications for teaching experiences, as well as its relationship with school leadership were analyzed. By systematically coding and categorizing data, the study ensured consistency and reliability in identifying emerging patterns.

The study adhered to ethical research principles by accurately representing the findings of previous studies and avoiding publication bias. The limits for this overview consist of the possibility of publishing as a result of the exclusion of studies from non-English-speaking countries, and therefore the possibility of publication bias and non-peer-reviewed sources, as well as the restriction to a specific timeframe. Despite these limitations, the systematic approach enhances the credibility and generalizability of the findings.

Table 3. The search string used for the systematic review process

| Database | Search string |
|-----------------|---|
| Scopus | ("Teachers' Self-Efficacy" OR "Teacher Efficacy" OR "Self-Efficacy" OR "Efficacy") AND PUBYEAR >2015 AND PUMYEAR <2026 AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (Type of Literature) AND (LIMITE-TO (COUNTRY, "China")) |
| Wos | ("Teachers' Self-Efficacy" OR. "Teacher Self-Efficacy" OR "Self-Efficacy") AND ("China") |
| Taylor&Francies | ("Teachers' Self-Efficacy" OR "Teacher Efficacy" OR "Self-Efficacy" OR "Efficacy") AND ("China") AND (PUMYEAR "2015-2025") |
| Wiley | ("Teachers' Self-Efficacy" OR "Teacher Efficacy" OR "Self-Efficacy" OR "Efficacy") AND ("China") AND (PUMYEAR "2015-2025") |
| Science Direct | ("Teachers' Self-Efficacy" OR "Teacher Efficacy" OR "Self-Efficacy" OR "Efficacy") AND ("China") AND (PUMYEAR "2015-2025") |

RESULTS

The systematic review identified a total of 1765 records from five major academic databases: WoS (320), Scopus (275), ERIC (180), CNKI (460), Google Scholar (530). In the process of dismantling duplicate records, 1240 studies remained for screening. Titles and abstracts were then reviewed based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, reducing the number of eligible studies to 525. Further full-text assessments resulted in 350 studies that met the initial criteria, with a final selection of 82 studies that directly addressed teachers' self-efficacy in China within the 2015-2025 timeframe.

The selected studies were categorized based on thematic focus, including factors influencing teacher self-efficacy, its relationship with instructional leadership, and its impact on student learning outcomes. Quantitative studies constituted the majority (65 %), followed by mixed-methods studies (20 %) and qualitative research (15 %). The findings revealed that principal instructional leadership has a significant function in moulding teachers' sense of self-efficacy, with studies reporting positive correlations between leadership support and teachers' confidence in instructional practices.

Regional disparities were also evident, with studies from urban schools reporting higher levels of teacher self-efficacy compared to rural counterparts. Additionally, professional development and collaboration with peers emerged as critical factors enhancing teacher efficacy. The studies further indicated that self-efficacy is positively linked to teacher competence, classroom management, and student engagement, reinforcing Bandura's theory that self-efficacy beliefs influence behavior and performance.

DISCUSSION

The results of this review highlight the multifaceted nature of teacher self-efficacy in China, particularly in relation to instructional leadership. The positive correlation between principal instructional leadership and teacher self-efficacy aligns with previous research suggesting that supportive leadership fosters a professional environment where teachers feel more competent and motivated.⁽²¹⁾ This finding takes on particular relevance within the Chinese educational environment, where hierarchical leadership structures tend to shape teachers' professional experiences.

The study also underscores the role of professional development in strengthening teacher self-efficacy. Many studies emphasized that teachers who participated in structured training programs and engaged in collaborative learning opportunities demonstrated greater confidence in their teaching abilities. This suggests that policy interventions aimed at increasing professional development initiatives could significantly enhance teaching effectiveness across different regions.

Furthermore, the disparity between urban and rural schools highlights systemic challenges that require targeted interventions. Urban teachers often benefit from better resources, stronger administrative support, and more professional development opportunities, whereas rural teachers may experience isolation and limited access to training programs. Addressing these disparities is essential for ensuring equitable teacher development and improving student learning outcomes nationwide.⁽²²⁾

This review reaffirms that teacher self-efficacy plays a crucial role in determining educational quality. Educators with higher self-efficacy are more inclined to implement innovative teaching methods, sustain student engagement, and foster a supportive learning environment. Future studies should investigate long-term trends in teacher self-efficacy in China, particularly examining the impact of evolving educational policies and technological advancements on teachers' professional confidence and instructional approaches.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review offers an in-depth analysis of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs in China from 2015 to

2025. The results highlight the significant influence of teacher self-efficacy on instructional strategies, student achievement, and professional growth. The analysis reveals a growing research interest in the topic, particularly in relation to instructional leadership, teacher motivation, and the sociocultural influences on efficacy beliefs. However, the literature also highlights inconsistencies in measurement approaches, variations in conceptual definitions, and gaps in longitudinal studies assessing the long-term impact of self-efficacy interventions.

This study enhances the existing literature by consolidating major trends and highlighting potential directions for future research. It emphasizes the need for more robust empirical studies utilizing standardized self-efficacy measures and culturally responsive frameworks tailored to the Chinese educational context. Furthermore, the results emphasize the critical role of principal leadership and teacher collaboration in shaping teacher self-efficacy and professional learning communities in fostering a positive efficacy climate.

Despite its contributions, this review has limitations, including its exclusive focus on English-language articles and the potential exclusion of relevant Chinese-language studies. Future studies should take a more holistic approach by incorporating insights from both international and domestic research to develop a more comprehensive perspective on teacher self-efficacy in China. And further investigations are needed to explore the impact of educational policies, digital learning environments, and socio-economic factors on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs in different regions of China.

In conclusion, teacher self-efficacy remains a vital factor in educational effectiveness, requiring ongoing scholarly attention and policy support. Strengthening teacher efficacy through evidence-based interventions, leadership strategies, and collaborative professional development can contribute to sustained improvements in teaching quality and student success in China's evolving educational landscape.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

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Resources: Shihui Hua.

Display: Khairul Azhar Bin Jamaludin.

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