

Perceptions of Principals towards the Professional Development of Primary Mainstream School Teachers of the Netherlands

Lakshmi Gopalakrishnan

Hashu Advani College of Special Education, affiliated to Mumbai University,
64-65, Collector's Colony, Chembur, Mumbai 400 074. India
lakshmi.g.hacse@gmail.com

Abstract: Professional development is crucial for teachers in improving the education of children with special educational needs in the mainstream schools. This study took a qualitative approach to examine the perceptions of the principals who are also responsible for the professional development of teachers in the mainstream primary schools of the Netherlands. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire from four principals selected by convenience sampling. The questionnaire was used for data triangulation. The findings indicate that the principals perceived that most of the teachers have adequate professional development in educating children with mild to moderate difficulties. However, the principals expressed that the teachers have difficulty in establishing parent-teacher collaboration as well as managing children with emotional and behavioral problems and severe disabilities. The principals in this study opined that collaborative learning was an effective professional development activity followed by reflective practice, action research and short-term training courses. Further analysis of data showed qualities related to educational, transactional and transformational leadership styles in the approaches followed by the principals to stimulate the professional development of teachers.

Keywords: mainstream education, special educational needs, professional development of teachers

1. Introduction

The Salamanca Statement (1994) brought a major change in the education system of many countries. There is a change not only in thinking but also in policies to support the education of children with special educational needs (Ponte, 2003). Different countries began restructuring their education system to provide more inclusive, physical, social and instructional opportunities for students with special educational needs in regular schools (Patterson, Marshall, & Bowling, 2000). Some countries opted to provide special support services within the classrooms. Some opted to provide special services in pullout programmes in addition to services offered in the class. Similar to this, mainstream schools in the Netherlands too have a variety of responsibilities like creating a barrier free environment, building support services and enhancing teachers' skills and knowledge in extending services to the children with special educational needs.

Children with special educational needs require extra support in a mainstream school. Teachers need to manage academic, social and behavioural difficulties of children in the classrooms. Additionally, the teachers need to ensure equal participation of every student in all possible ways in the classroom activities. In fact, the teachers who are serving in the mainstream schools were originally prepared to teach children without any special educational needs. Due to this, there was not enough emphasis on the education of children with special educational needs in the primary teacher education programme. On the contrary, the teachers have to teach the children with special educational needs along with other children in the regular school classrooms. This practice is new to them. Additionally, the teachers may have to take preventive, remedial or pro-active actions after careful consideration, which may require modification in curriculum, teaching

methods and support inside and outside the classrooms. Ponte (2003) describes why teachers need to take decisions:

'In short, professionals work in complex situations striving to achieve a variety of objectives; in which different factors at different levels of the organization interact, sometimes in an unpredictable way; so that it is not always possible to estimate in advance just, what the effect will be of the education being offered.' (Ponte, 2003, p. 7).

Teachers also need to share responsibilities with other professionals in identifying, planning, coordinating special services and implementing strategies inside and outside the classrooms. They have to involve with the professionals in decision-making and monitoring the educational development of children with special educational needs. In order to educate the children with special needs, teachers need to know different instructional strategies and other related needs. Professional development of teachers is very crucial since it is the cornerstone for inclusive education (Imants, 2002). Therefore, the teachers in the mainstream schools require an effective professional development.

As leaders, principals play a vital role in the professional development of teachers. Teachers in the mainstream schools are becoming more involved in the provision of services for children with special educational needs. It is essential that teachers be provided support that would facilitate the acquisition of skills in order to provide services for children with different educational needs. For successful implementation of inclusive programs, principals need to commit themselves to professional development and building support groups that increase the efficacy of general educators, thus enhancing teachers' perceptions of competence in teaching students with disabilities (Bateman & Bateman, 2001).

Several studies confirm the need of adequate professional development for teachers for teaching children with special educational needs in the mainstream schools (Algozzine & Algozzine, 2007; Tick, Vander Ende, & Verhulst, 2007). One such study reveals the professional development is inadequate due to lack of principals' support. Principals are unable to provide support due to lack of awareness about the education of children with special educational needs and they prefer to remain detached (Patterson, Marshall, & Bowling, 2000).

Principals relate to teachers, students, parents and the community. They also understand that teacher is the most important influence on students' learning. Therefore, principals have a crucial role in facilitating professional development of staff. Their role is essential in promoting continuous learning by turning the whole school as a learning centre. Creating such a learning culture will have ongoing professional development for all (Fullan, 2005). On this backdrop, the present study was designed to increase the understanding of professional development of teachers as may be perceived by the principals of mainstream primary schools. The researcher selected the primary schools for this study, since primary education is an important stage where development occurs in physical, social, emotional and cognitive domains that influence learning in children. This study was intended to understand the perceptions of the principals of mainstream primary schools towards the professional development of teachers.

2. Research Questions

Four sub questions were framed to answer the main research question, 'What are the perceptions of principals towards the professional development of primary teachers in the mainstream schools of the Netherlands in teaching children with special educational needs?' Following were the sub questions.

- In the opinion of principals, is the professional development of teachers in the schools adequate to educate children with special educational needs?
- What professional development activities according to the principals help the teachers in teaching the children with special educational needs?
- How do the principals stimulate professional development of teachers?
- What issues surrounding the education of the children with special educational needs require professional development according to the principals?

3. Methodology

Since the study was on perceptions, beliefs and values, a qualitative approach for data collection was chosen that enabled the researcher to collect data in the form of words (Robson, 2002). The researcher used a semi-structured, individual, face-to-face interview as it was necessary to probe and clarify the information with the flexibility of questioning (Bryman, 2004). To rule out the bias and to have exact data, the researcher audio taped the interviews. Later a questionnaire was administered for data triangulation.

3.1 Sample

The respondents consisted of 4 principals of mainstream primary schools in the Netherlands through convenient sampling. Since the study was not focused to generalise the findings, the researcher had proceeded with data collection

with the sample considering that the findings might provide "a springboard for further research" (Bryman, 2004, p. 100).

3.2 Ethical Issues

The principals of the mainstream schools were explicitly clarified the purpose and focus of the study with an assurance to inform the findings of the research. They were assured of the confidentiality of the information and anonymity of their identities before they participated in the study. Interviews were audio taped with the respondents' consents.

4. Data Analysis & Discussion

Initially, an inductive approach was used. The codes that emerged from the data were merged together and then clustered to form categories according to the similarities and differences. Interpretation of these concepts answered the research questions. Some of the concepts emerged during the inductive approach were related to new theories using a deductive approach. Thus, this study used both inductive and deductive approaches (Gray, 2004). It was interesting to note that further analysing these concepts led to some new connections and theories related to leadership qualities. Throughout the study, peer debriefing was done for establishing validity and reliability of data. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend a check-coding at this stage. Accordingly, another researcher coded to confirm the categories for noting patterns, themes and trends for making sensible conclusion.

Adequacy of professional Development of Teachers

All the principals felt that the present form of professional development, which consisted of collaborative learning, reflective practice and short-term courses, was adequate for most of the teachers in teaching children with special educational needs who have mild or moderate disabilities. There was a general tendency among the principals to attribute the professional development of teachers to the ability of teachers in managing the children with special educational needs who are currently studying in the schools. However, all the principals were consensual in expressing the need for teachers to develop professionally in educating children with behavioural and emotional problems and children who have special needs due to disabilities of severe in nature. Unfortunately, the behavioural and emotional problems were found to be extremely complex to untangle and manage by the teachers. All the principals opined that the present level of adequacy was due to collaborative learning with other teachers who pursued a training course and had experience in educating children with special educational needs, special teachers from Regional Expertise Centre and special services coordinators, reflective practices and by pursuing short-term training courses.

Avenues for Professional Development Activities

Principals considered collaborative learning as the most effective professional development activity. This included, learning with senior teachers who had either pursued a training course or had experience in educating children with special educational needs and discussion with special services coordinators and special educators from the Regional Expertise Centre. Specially, the principals perceived the collaborative learning with a teacher who had pursued a long-term training

course or many short term training courses and had experience in educating children with special needs to be more effective. Reflection about their own practice by observing their own actions and discussing in the meeting were considered yet another effective practice. Performing action research was viewed as the second effective professional development followed by pursuing short- term special training courses. The principals mentioned that visiting special schools and discussing with specialists led to professional development of teachers. They also suggested reading, guidance and discussions with teachers from Regional Expertise Centre, joining learning communities and carrying out action research in collaboration with University may also contribute to teachers' professional development.

Stimulating Professional Development of Teachers

The findings revealed that the principals stimulate professional development of teachers by: (a) offering flexibility in choosing the professional development activities, (b) involving the teachers in decision making, (c) expressing trust and belief, (d) offering support, (e) establishing school culture, (f) identifying in-service needs, (g) setting future goals, (h) allotting time and money, (i) appreciation and encouragement, (j) giving confidence, (k) facilitating discussions, (l) monitoring and mentoring, (m) delegating responsibilities, (n) empowering teachers to take decisions on professional development .

It seemed that each principal took different approaches in stimulating professional development of teachers. However, all of them demonstrated the characteristics of effective educational leadership. Further analysis revealed the presence of some characteristics representing transactional and transformational leaderships in their leadership styles.

Disability Specific Professional Development

According to the principals, teachers were finding difficulty in educating children with emotional and behavioural problems and severe disabilities. Therefore, the classroom management of these children were challenging for teachers. At the same time, overall management of children with special educational needs was perceived as a difficult job. Even the parents of many children with diagnoses of emotional and behavioural problems were unable to implement the strategies of school at home leading to difficulty in establishing parent-teacher collaboration. The different educational requirement of children with special educational needs made the teaching sessions more complex. These issues were evident in the classrooms. The principals realised the link between disability specific professional development and the ability to deal with the classroom issues and expressed their desire for better professional development for their teachers in managing children with emotional and behavioural problems.

5. Conclusions

The present study revealed that present professional development of teachers was adequate in teaching children with mild to moderate disabilities according to the principals. Further analysis of data identified that the principals could not define "mild to moderate disabilities". Again, the respondents' responses reflected the present status of professional development. Each of them interpreted the adequacy of professional development in context of several aspects. The principals viewed the adequacy of professional development in

the context of the current need of the children present in the schools and management of these children during the past years. They failed to view professional development in the context of preparedness to meet all the needs of special education. Principals did not relate the professional development of teachers to the needs of children with visual impairment or hearing impairment since their schools did not get an opportunity to educate these children so far. Above all, variables such as experience of the teachers, exposure to education of children with special educational needs, involvement of teachers in constructing their own professional development, motivation, interest and love for children, that could influence the adequacy of professional development were not considered.

Though it was disappointing to note that the teachers had inadequate skills in educating children with emotional and behavioural problems and severe disabilities, the promising side was the perception of the principals towards the professional development of teachers. They were positive in noting that the teachers will develop professionally through collaborative learning, action research and reflective practice. However it was evident that the principals did not favour long term professional development programmes for teachers as they found difficulty in making alternate arrangements in the teachers' absence. However, it was concluded that the teachers in the mainstream schools need sufficient professional development, which aim at including more and more children with diverse needs gradually into the mainstream education. Such professional development should help them in using approaches and strategies unfamiliar to them and developing their own skills in teaching children with special educational needs.

Principals of mainstream schools participated in the study stimulated professional development of teachers in various ways. Analysis showed that they demonstrated qualities of transactional, transformational and educational leadership styles in empowering teachers in constructing their own professional development.

Children with special needs are integrated in the mainstream schools in India. Many schools do not have resource room facility. It becomes the responsibility of the regular teachers to educate the integrated child. This situation demands the teachers' ability and skills in the integrated classrooms that may have children with various special needs. Therefore, it is important to concentrate on the professional development of teachers in the mainstream schools. The findings of this study serve as a guideline to look into the professional development of teachers. The principals of primary schools can concentrate on creating opportunities for the teachers to develop professionally in order to teach the integrated children.

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Author Profile

Lakshmi Gopalakrishnan received the M.A (SEN) from Roehampton University in 2008 and then PhD in Special Education from YCMOU India. During 2007-2008 author stayed in the Netherlands for doing the dissertation work for MA (SEN) related to the present study. She is presently with HACSE in Mumbai.