

**SPECIAL EDUCATION 2000 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.
DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

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Abstract

With the introduction of the policy, Special Education 2000 came the necessity for many principals, teachers and teacher aides to make a shift in attitudes and practices when catering for learners with special needs. To help facilitate these necessary changes, all schools in New Zealand were offered the opportunity to participate in special education professional development programmes.

This presentation outlines the process of how professional development was offered to every school in New Zealand, the nature of the professional development offered and the perceptions of teachers, teacher aides and principals as to the effectiveness of the professional development. The research showed that not all schools availed themselves of the opportunity for professional development. Of those teachers who had received the professional development, the majority responded positively and believed that the professional development had made a positive difference to their role in catering for learners with special needs. School principals believed that the professional development went some way in meeting the needs of their school.

Introduction

The implementation of the New Zealand policy, *Special Education 2000* (SE2000) necessitated a shift in attitudes and practices for many principals and teachers. Aspects of this policy were a departure from previous special education provision in New Zealand where students with learning and behaviour difficulties were usually seen as the responsibility of specialist teachers rather than regular class teachers. Similarly, changes in funding eligibility and allocation meant that there was a new set of rules for schools to work within. Recognising that many principals and teachers did not have the training or knowledge to work within this new framework, the Ministry of Education initiated a nationwide professional development programme. This was in keeping with the current trend for many countries to use professional development as "a key mechanism to bring about educational change" (Fullan & Mascal, 2000, p. 32).

The aim of the professional development was to "assist principals and teachers in all schools to plan and implement programmes that met the needs of their students within the framework of the Special Education 2000 policy and the New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1998, p.4). The Ministry of Education's objective was to

provide national professional development that "was based on the policy, covered all schools, met the different requirements of trustees, principals and teachers, was school based and was consistent across all of New Zealand" (Ministry of Education, 1998, p.4).

At the beginning of 1998, approximately one year after the implementation of the new policy had begun, advertisements were placed calling for contractors to deliver special education professional development to schools. By the end of 1998, providers had been contracted to deliver professional development in all geographical areas of New Zealand. It was intended that professional development would be offered to all schools and thus reach all teachers. Providers included Specialist Education Services (an organisation contracted by the Ministry of Education to provide specialist special education advice and support), Colleges of Education and University Schools of Education. While each provider had a slightly different model of delivery, there were a number of similarities within the training packages due to the Ministry of Education contractual guidelines. These included familiarisation with the Special Education 2000 policy and a needs analysis of each school. Schools were also offered a choice of workshops based on their needs. These workshop opportunities included topics such as behaviour difficulties, assessment, partnerships, adaptations and specific teaching strategies. Many providers also supported schools in writing or updating their special education policies. It should be noted that while the first stage of the professional development (familiarisation of the policy and needs analysis of the school) usually involved the entire staff at each participating school, the workshop opportunities typically involved only one staff member from each school.

Method

Information was gathered from a range of sources. In 1999 and 2000, as part of the overall evaluation of the SE2000 policy, interviews were conducted with principals, teachers and teacher aides. Also, over 1400 schools completed questionnaires. During 2000, 361 primary and secondary school personnel who had been involved in the professional development completed a specifically designed professional development questionnaire. Supplementary information was also gained from: analysis of milestone reports from contracted providers of professional development; Ministry of Education Special Education 2000 Updates (newsletters sent to stakeholders informing them of developments concerning the policy); telephone interviews with contract providers and face to face interviews with a sample of personnel involved in the professional development contracts.

Findings and Discussion

When the first questionnaire was administered in March 1999, as would be expected, there were limited reported effects of the SE2000 professional development on schools and school personnel. For many schools, this professional development had not begun, or was only in the early stages of delivery. By June 2000 however, only 20% of respondents who were classroom teachers had not received some professional development training in SE2000. Therefore, the results presented in this report are sourced from the second and third phase of the evaluation, that is, the general questionnaire and interviews administered in early 2000 (phase two), the specific professional development questionnaire administered later in 2000 (phase three) as well as the supplementary sources noted earlier.

Impact of SE2000 professional development on teachers

As Gilmore (2000) states, it is often difficult to describe the impact of professional development in any quantifiable way. Adding to this problem is that sometimes the effects or impact of professional development, if observable at all, are not seen or felt until teachers have had time to reflect and perhaps try out new ideas. However, the relationship between

effective professional development, the increase in teacher confidence and subsequent improved teaching practice is easier to measure and has been documented in the literature (for example, Fullan, 1993; Gilmore, 2000; Massey University, 1999). Therefore the researchers were interested in the effects of the professional development on teacher confidence. By phase three of the evaluation, just over half of the teacher respondents believed that the professional development had made a positive difference to their confidence. Specifically, this was by way of increased knowledge and information regarding the help and support that was available and by learning a range of practical ideas and strategies for identification and assessment of learners with special needs particularly as this related to the individual education plan (IEP). Some indicative comments included:

Personally I feel a lot more confident.

SE2000 professional development clarified many issues and concerns I held, and restore some confidence in the SE2000 objectives.

I am more aware of the services out there that I can contact. Wonderful, a lot more knowledge and confidence through Ministry contract in 1999 and Specialist Education Services courses.

A minority of teachers who had received SE2000 professional development believed it had made little or no difference to their confidence. Many teachers gave no reasons, but those who did, indicated that they already had the knowledge, expertise or confidence and accordingly the courses did not offer them anything new. Some teachers also indicated that they had completed courses, papers and qualifications in the area of special education and were already knowledgeable. Another group of teachers considered that the courses were insufficiently specific to be practical and that teachers required professional development that could be directly applied in the classroom.

Linked closely to teacher confidence is that of attitude. One of the key determinants of successful inclusion has been found to be that of teacher attitude (Clark, Dyson & Millward 1995; Cowley, 2001; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). Important attitudes for inclusion are many but include the belief that all students can learn, that they belong in their local school, that adaptations may need to be made for them and that teachers will need to work in partnership with a range of people while accepting that they play an important part in meeting the learner's needs. Participants in the professional development contracts were asked what effect the professional development had had on their attitudes to special education in general, and to the policy, SE2000. Positive changes were reported in attitude by 56% of respondents. For 27%, their attitudes had remained the same and 4% had a negative change in attitude. It should be noted however that even though changes in beliefs or attitudes take place, it does not necessarily follow that changes in practice will occur (Garrett & Bowles, 1997).

A major objective of any teacher professional development is the improvement of teachers' skills and capabilities. In a New Zealand Education Review Office (an agency contracted by the Ministry of Education to carry out assurance audits of learning institutions) report into the relationship of in-service training and student achievement, it was found that in-service training has a central part to play in developing teachers' skills and capabilities. Further to this however, this report stated that "effective in-service training can enhance teacher performance and this in turn will bring about improvements in student achievement" (2000, p. 2). In line with this assumption, respondents were asked if the professional development had any effects on their capacity to cater for learners with special needs. In this area, less positive results were found. Only 38% of teacher respondents who had participated in the professional development believed that it had improved their ability to cater for students with

special needs. For 25% there was no change in their ability and 2% believed that they were now less able to cater for these learners.

When asked if the professional development they received reflected their needs (for example, in the initial stages of the evaluation, respondents indicated that their greatest professional development need was in the area of behaviour management), 69% of respondents thought that it did reflect their needs. There was a small group who were unsure (17%) and 14% thought that it had not reflected their needs. The extent to which needs were actually met in the programmes ranged from fully met for 9% of respondents, mostly met for 46%, partly met for 38% and not at all met for 7% of respondents. Overall 93% of respondents believed that at least some, if not most, of their needs were met through the professional development contracts. The following comments illustrate some of the views expressed by respondents:

It was thorough; it gave us some choice depending on our needs and was interactive.

It was presented in a real hands-on way and I could immediately begin using the techniques in my classroom – with huge success. Whole staff training meant we all now have that basic knowledge, and the support of a fully trained special needs person.

Not enough scope to be able to identify specific needs e.g. many questions are left unanswered regarding the education of moderate needs students. How are they identified? Who gets access to SEG grant? ... Also, some of the courses lacked nuts and bolts information e.g. in adapting the curriculum, too much time spent on the need to adapt curriculum and not enough time spent on how you adapt curriculum.

Obviously, meeting the perceived needs of teachers is an important aspect of any professional development. It could be argued that this top-down approach to professional development (that is, professional development that is initiated and directed from the Ministry of Education) is less likely to meet these needs as teachers may have different needs from that of the Ministry of Education. However, as all schools involved in the professional development were part of a needs analysis prior to the professional development, this approach went some way in countering this likelihood.

Impact of professional development on schools

Professional development also can, and should, have effects upon school improvement generally. The SE2000 professional development was targeted at both individual teachers and at a school-wide level. Therefore, principals were asked if the professional development provisions related to particular initiatives in the SE2000 policy were meeting their school needs. Table 1.1 outlines these findings:

Table 1.1 the degree to which the needs of schools have been met through SE2000 professional development programmes (2000)

| Initiative | % of responses of met professional development needs in each strand |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Moderate learning | 39 |
| Moderate behaviour | 35 |
| High or very high ongoing needs | 41 |
| Speech/language | 19 |
| Severe behaviour initiative | 16 |
| Culturally appropriate provisions | 10 |

Table 1.1 illustrates that the majority of principals believed that their school's professional development needs were not completely addressed. This perceived shortcoming was particularly noticeable in meeting the needs of students with speech/language and severe behaviour difficulties and in providing culturally appropriate services. It should be noted however that such shortcomings in professional development may also reflect a wider dissatisfaction with the services received in these initiatives which was noted in the other research strands of this evaluation.

By June 2000, principals' perceptions of the training linked to SE2000 varied:

Apart from an initial visit to inform me about the programme, options which may be made available, the attendance at one course by two staff members, we have not been contacted, communicated with nor invited to any other level of participation. We are extremely disappointed.

The courses I attended were really useful to me. I am able to use the information with class teachers but it has mainly been on a 'request' basis. I'm sure it would be useful to others if we can find the time to programme workshops on teacher only days, or staff meetings.

Board of Trustees

The New Zealand school system is based on a model of self-managing schools. This means that every school has a Board of Trustees (BoT) made up of the principal, a teacher representative and five parent/community representatives. For secondary schools, there is also a student representative. The role of the Board of Trustees is one of governance, they are involved in such areas as policy formation and implementation, management of school plant, the hiring and employment of staff and the overall management of school funding (McKenzie, 1999). Because of the critical role played by BoTs, it would seem highly advantageous for them to be involved in the professional development associated with the new policy and its directions. However, early on in the implementation of the policy, findings from school principals indicated that Boards of Trustee needed no training. Reasons given

were that they were sufficiently informed by the principal or Ministry of Education circulars (47%), were concerned about governance and management issues (24%), were too busy to attend training (22%) or were not interested in further training (7%). Considerable concern was also expressed about the pressure on Board of Trustee members to attend training on a myriad of matters, when they had their own jobs, families and related commitments, on top of their role as BoT members. However, when training was deemed necessary, the most frequently mentioned content area related to financial obligations and accountability with the Special Education Grant, especially in relation to ERO audits. The second most frequently mentioned content areas were in terms of an overview of the policy. The general trend therefore was for Board of Trustees not to be involved in any part of the professional development contracts.

Conclusions

It appears that professional development is a vital aspect of any reform initiative. Overall, the SE2000 professional development had a significant impact on the successful implementation of a new policy. It ensured that school personnel were familiar with the components of the policy and it had positive effects on the confidence, attitudes and (to a lesser extent), perceived capabilities of teachers who had participated. As well as these outcomes however, it would be hoped that professional development would also have positive outcomes for learners with special needs. These outcomes are traditionally difficult to measure or quantify, and this was certainly the case in this evaluation project. This phenomenon is well documented in the literature. Fullan and Mascal (2000), in their review of the literature in this field, point out that "the link between professional development investments and levels of student achievement is one which is often evoked but never proven" (p. 39). This is probably because a range of variables affects student achievement. Also, it can take time for effects to be seen as a result of professional development. Nevertheless, for the majority of the participants who had received SE2000 professional development, it had a positive effect on both their attitudes to special education and their classroom practices. The majority of participants also indicated that the professional development offered reflected their needs and that at the conclusion of the professional development, some or most of their needs had been met.

However, by the end of the SE2000 professional development contract there was a group of teachers who had received minimal or no professional development (20% had none). Of the 80% who received professional development, 30% were unable to participate in all aspects of the contract. If the implementation of a policy based upon the principles and practices of inclusion is to be successful, (principles and practices that may still be foreign to a number of principals and teachers), it is imperative that professional development reaches all school personnel. Because of this and the changing nature of schools' staff and student population, there is a need for the professional development in this area to be on-going. Ideally, the nature of this professional development would be negotiated between individual schools and providers, but the results of this study show an obvious need in the areas of behaviour difficulties and speech language needs. Similarly, the area of culturally appropriate provision is one where schools are feeling unprepared and one that is highly relevant due to the disproportionate number of Maori learners (the indigenous people of New Zealand) affected by the Special Education 2000 policy initiatives. These are areas where the Ministry of Education and individual schools could direct their future professional development funding.

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