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Comparative Analysis of Special Education Teacher Training in France and Norway: How effective, areas taught and recommendation for improvement.¹

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the quality and areas of training in the existing special education teacher education programme in France and Norway by examining how special education teachers are prepared in carrying out four components of administrative, teaching, student evaluation and inclusive tasks in everyday classroom. The theoretical framework used in this research is international comparative analysis via questionnaire, institutional analysis (training programme), discourse analysis(interview) and classroom observation based on Crossley and Vulliamy's 'case for the case'(1984) method. The efficiency of the training programme is evaluated by (i) studying satisfaction of the teachers after training, whether knowledge and hands-on teaching tasks provided were successful to prepare them for real classroom teaching to children with special needs, (ii) relevant views of teachers about the training programme and (iii) observation of teachers teaching as per the training model. Subjects in this study include special education student teachers, teacher trainers, primary and secondary school teachers and academic psychologist.

Key Words

Special education, inclusive education, teacher education, teaching methods, educational assessment, educational administration

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¹ Master Thesis Abstract

Introduction

This study aims to understand the quality and areas of training in the existing special education teacher education programme in France and Norway by examining how special education teachers are prepared in carrying out four components of administrative, teaching, student evaluation and inclusive tasks in everyday classroom. The theoretical framework used in this research is international comparative analysis via questionnaire, institutional analysis (training programme), discourse analysis(interview) and classroom observation based on Crossley and Vulliamy's 'case for the case'(1984) method. The efficiency of the training programme is evaluated by (i) studying satisfaction of the teachers after training, whether knowledge and hands-on teaching tasks provided were successful to prepare them for real classroom teaching to children with special needs, (ii) relevant views of teachers about the training programme and (iii) observation of teachers teaching as per the training model. Subjects in this study include special education student teachers, teacher trainers, primary and secondary school teachers and academic psychologist.

The four components included in this study to evaluate the quality of special education teacher training in France and Norway consist of teaching, evaluation, inclusion, and administration and collaboration; which are combination of both subject matter and practical experience. The sub-components of comparison are shown as below:

Teaching: Knowledge about disabilities; Pedagogic skills/ methods; Creating teaching materials; Individualized education plan.

Evaluation: Diagnosis and early intervention; Measuring students' progress.

Inclusion: Promote inclusive class environment; Dealing with conflict.

Administration and collaboration: General education teacher; Parents.

Components of Teacher Training Programme

Teaching

Knowledge about Disabilities

The French focused and specialized training regarding particular disability is able to produce expert special educators well-informed about the needs and learning pattern of students with special needs. In the course of specialization, they are drilled on various aspects related to a particular disability or needs in depth, via lectures, workshops, group discussion, projects and also practical experience from pre-service and in-service training.

Slightly different in Norway, the learning process is convergent that all teachers are exposed to basic training of special education and types of disabilities in core modules even before commencing studies becoming a specialist educator. As student teachers progress through the semesters, they become more specialised into a specific type of disability or disorder and thus become an expert in that area. Most importantly, a student teacher can learn more from The National Support System for Special Education (Statped) by participation in their activities at preschool, primary school and secondary levels in providing training to children, young people and adults with special educational needs.

Pedagogic Skills/ Methods

French chooses qualified trainers in IUFM who are mostly teacher-researchers (university professors, lecturers etc.), professors of secondary education, primary school teachers and

principal advisors of education with up-to-date classroom experience. Besides, student teachers benefit from the supervision of *conseillers pédagogiques* or pedagogic consultant during their in-school placement to advise them on various tasks.

In Norway, teaching is not restricted to the traditional understanding of knowledge teaching, but has to cover all kinds of instruction and training activities appropriate to the needs of the pupils. According to the experienced teacher trainer, teachers are now recommended to devote time to various training elements such as training of perception, speech, motor function; occupational and play therapy and so on.

Creating Teaching Materials

Norwegian teachers are taught that as individual curricula for children with special needs should not be too different from class curriculum for better inclusion, materials should be made easier and readily understandable so that students can discuss them with peers in their group and follow lesson well. To achieve this, a combination of different books and booklets followed by adaptation are often the daily routine of special education teachers in order to produce educational programme suited to the pupil.

In France, by knowing that students with special needs might need more time and support structure to learn, student teachers are taught and drilled on principles to follow when preparing teaching materials. Student teachers were given practical exercise to ensure teaching aids are concrete, supplemented with images and related to daily life experience. Besides, presentation of teaching materials should be organized as students have difficulties in forming logics, reasoning, thinking with fragmented information, and all should be designed with small steps conducive for learning and achieving instant results.

Individualized Education Plan

In Norway, special education teachers are trained to take part in discussions on IEP by adapting to the needs of individual students, knowing what skills are achievable for certain students in a semester, attending hearing to finalise IEP and how mediation and different therapies can be incorporated and to be familiar with basic special education laws and regulations. Teachers learnt that the content of an IEP is determined by the student's cognitive ability, communication skills, operational capacity, emotional, interpersonal, sensory function, health status, ability of daily life, language skills, mathematics and other academic ability in the current situation when they first enter school or to be updated each year. It also has to be linked to relevant factors including family background, suitable assessment methods and available resources.

Quite similar in France, training includes the whole process of analysis of needs conducted by the school team of the teacher referral and partnered by the child's parents, registration and reception in the referred school, mobilisation and the establishment of support required throughout period of schooling, followed by first assessment by teaching staff to judge the suitability of PPS and continue with reviews and adjustment if needed. It also specifies the quality and nature of necessary accompaniments for the child including therapies or rehabilitation, the use of auxiliary support in school life and appropriate teaching materials or living aids. Most important factor for the success of PPS is the teacher referral of the pupil who ensures continuity and consistency of the implementation of PPS.

Evaluation

Diagnosis and Early Intervention

French special education teachers are educated to inform school psychologists or nurse when they detect symptoms of autism, dyslexia, emotional disorder and others among children. It can be initially judged based on the decline of performance in school, inability to mix well with others, lack of interest, obvious spelling disorder, big achievement and behaviour gap with peers and failure to complete assigned work and so on. Hence, student teachers are aware of the importance of recognizing child's difficulties during early childhood education, connecting information from child's health reviews to learning situations, starting immediate individual support, using knowledge of parents and experts, and providing special attention in transition phases.

In Norway, training programme is built to facilitate early intervention to reduce cases where children face greater learning difficulties later in life due to unidentified and unaided disability, especially for children or with reading and writing difficulties or those from minority language backgrounds. Preschool teachers are among the first to be in contact with children and granted the opportunity to identify any learning disabilities demonstrated by children as early as possible. Hence, both teacher training and the training of preschool teachers are reviewed to ensure the smooth coherence of syllabus.

Measuring Students' Progress

In Norway, pupil assessment is based on goals set in curriculum or IEP to provide information on student's progress. Rating scale is a consistent way to measure positive and negative behaviour, attention span, independence skills and so on. Through observation, teachers can focus on a precise behaviour to determine how well the students have mastered certain skills or non-systematically observe general behaviours, responses and interactions which are informative. A standardized behaviour checklist can also be used to identify specific learning behaviour, ability to perform a particular task or check on mistakes committed, for measurement on progress or as diagnostic assessment process.

According to school practice in France, continuous assessment is carried out at regular intervals with progress being noted in students' report books called livrets scolaire. For students with special needs, continuous assessment will be based on IEP and teachers are trained to implement it in relation to learning objectives, comments and criterion-referenced grading of competence. On top of that, teachers adhere to special provisions made for students with disabilities to take part in examinations such as by using a third person, one-third addition of time allocated for their tests and use of specialized equipment. Teachers are also trained on the importance of educational record review to measure student's progress referring to cumulative folders or files that document the individualized education plan, learning programs which the student participated, support services received, performance and assessment portfolio, report cards and behaviour or health record.

Inclusion

Promote Inclusive Class Environment

During the third year of the special education training program in Norway, in order to promote awareness and joint effort towards inclusion, general education teachers and special education students have the opportunity to attend courses together, to learn and understand each other's work and focus on how to adapt lessons for children with special needs at all stages of planning, implementation and assessing achievements. This kind of collective learning and collaboration is very meaningful as it sets the correct professional identities within the inclusive setting, foster communication between groups and enable both general and special education teachers to familiarise with the concept of inclusive education. Both benefit from the learning of common types of learning disabilities, teaching methods and inclusive models.

In France, integration is a step-by-step process ranges from part-time education in mainstream schools or a more complete integration based on individual capacity and needs. During teacher training, teachers are taught how to promote inclusive learning and to develop right attitude towards children with disabilities by valuing all children as educable.

Dealing with Conflict

In Norway, teachers are reminded the three main tasks of schooling which is 'care, upbringing and teaching', which position 'care' as the first and 'upbringing' as the second step towards individualized and inclusive teaching as the final step. They find the need to establish a caring classroom first and build up the right and courteous personalities in children before smooth and healthy teaching and learning can proceed in a classroom. Conflict happens everyday and if teachers are trained how to handle them properly by setting the right foundation and behaviour on how students should respect each other, irrespective of physical or mental disabilities. This is a very challenging task for teachers as they need to establish respect, understanding, emotional management and self-control in class.

From observation in classroom, French special education teacher also demonstrates good conflict management skills, and they shared that some modules related to this topic has been included during their training programme. Teachers must bring out their caring qualities to counsel and reassure the children, reinforce his or her self confidence and composure while cultivating understanding and tolerance in classroom. The teacher also learnt the storytelling teaching method to describe the inner world of emotions of children with special needs to increase empathy and understanding in other children. Teachers also provide models of the right behaviour and attitudes among peers as a concrete example for the student with special needs to emulate, especially to learn about the social conventions and how to respond to the reactions of others.

Administration and Collaboration

Collaboration with General Education Teachers

In France, whenever general education teachers need help with their students of special needs and emotional or behavioural problems, they would contact and request for assistance from special education teachers or more appropriately the school psychologist who is well-trained in counselling on top of instructional skills and knowledge of disabilities. The school psychologist who participated in this study often holds interviews with teachers, to facilitate their teaching in classroom and counsel aggressive students

individually or in group. She also fulfilled her responsibility of carrying out observation in classroom and conducting some lessons with the children to verify the children's progress, which will be followed by discussion with classroom teacher. For example, she noted the progress and difficulties in children with autism and gave advice on how to change their individualized programs.

In Norway, special education programmes in ordinary classes are quite frequently organized in co-operation between two teachers, one ordinary classroom teacher and one special education teacher. This form of co-teaching seems to have gained ground over the past few years, also in France. The Norwegian special education teachers are used to the practice of divided teacher responsibility as students with special needs are expected to be present in classroom. Both planning and implementation of the teaching programme are done together collaboratively which acts as a good model and measure for promoting inclusion. When decision on teaching content and materials is made jointly, there is always time allotted for differentiation and individual help.

Collaboration with Parents

Educational policies regarding parental involvement in Norway where cooperation between parents and teachers have always been a part of the school agenda and curriculum in primary and secondary schools for many years. Its teacher training courses also cater modules to learn about this relationship and collaboration in psychology, projects and practice. They are trained about common school policies that any recommendations for special education must be discussed with parents, for consent, placement, individual programmes and diagnosis process where school psychologist intervenes to investigate the needs of their children.

In France, the training programme recognizes the role of parents in the decision-making process in all phases of the individualized education plan or personal schooling project (PPS) of the child. Partnership between parents and teachers is one of the most important measure to ensure the success of students with special needs as they need learning opportunity and support beyond school hours extending to home learning in all situations possible. To promote close involvement of parents, student teachers are granted the opportunity to take part in parent-teacher meeting and learn psychology of parents playing the role as home educator. Teachers must know how to deal with stubborn or disinterested parents who give endless excuses to their unwillingness to join hands to their child's learning or due to other factors like clashes of working hours, lack of knowledge regarding learning, transportation problems and so on.

Conclusion

In conclusion, high qualification, selection, specialization and training standards set by IUFM (University Institute for Teachers Training) account for the reliable credential of French specialist educator who are instructed by experienced trainers maintaining active relationship with practicing schools or teachers. Norwegian teacher training programme excels by introducing common content elements in both general and special education programme to ensure coherence and comprehensiveness in the profession, while decentralization is conducive for internal flexibility, less bureaucracy and more learner-centered approach. Nevertheless, more emphasis should be given to develop inclusive education as a whole in training programme, including educational strategy and policy benchmark, school culture, expanded curriculum, special support, administration and

leadership, assessment, organizational structures, learning materials and conducive environment for students. Follow-up of newly qualified teachers should be mandated so that experienced teachers can provide knowledge and emotional support especially in the first year of their teaching career. In a nutshell, continuous assessment of training programme and feedback accumulated from student teachers are extremely crucial in improving the current system in line with students' needs and latest educational scenario.

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