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Exploring Teachers' Perspectives About Executive Functions
in the Primary School Context in New Zealand

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Abstract

Cognitive psychology research has suggested that executive functions (EFs), a set of cognitive skills that facilitate goal-directed behaviour, play an important role in learning and academic success. EFs, comprised of the three core cognitive components of inhibitory skills, working memory, and cognitive flexibility, are also associated with social-emotional learning and competency. Research has also shown that targeted teaching and practice can improve EFs, with far reaching benefits. However, there is currently little evidence about whether teachers are aware of these skills, or of their importance. This study, therefore, explored New Zealand primary teachers' perspectives about EFs as a necessary first step to understanding teachers' knowledge, values and practice in New Zealand.

The study used a mixed methods design to obtain quantitative and qualitative data through an online survey. Results indicated that teachers were generally aware that there is a set of non subject-specific skills that are important to learning, but their knowledge and understanding of EFs themselves, prior to completion of the survey, was limited. Teachers rated all EFs as very important to learning and the majority of teachers were already attempting to support development of EFs within their classroom practice. Knowledge of and use of specific activities or teaching strategies to target development of specific EFs was limited, however many teachers were providing learning environments conducive to using and practicing EFs.

This research highlights the need for professional development and support for teachers to develop their understanding of EFs. It also demonstrated a need to provide teachers with a range of teaching strategies and activities to integrate within their current learning environments in order to better support development of EFs within their students.

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