



Teachers' perceptions of additional support needs of students in mainstream primary education

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream primary education requires teachers to be proactively responsive to a variety of student educational needs, especially because of the increasing heterogeneity of school intake. Despite the increasing interest in learners' additional support needs rather than student deficits, empirical studies on the topic remain scarce. Therefore, this study addresses teacher perceptions ($n = 57$) of additional learning support needs of students ($n = 114$; mean age = 9; 48% male). Exploratory factor analyses (PCA; PAF) identified four dimensions of need: a) instructional support, b) (on-task) behavioral support, c) emotional support, and d) peer support. Interestingly, the views of teachers correlated with the characteristics of students in terms of student attainment, the teacher-perceived task-oriented behavior of students, the teacher-perceived (problem) behavior in the classroom and teacher-perceived relationships with students. The present study shows that the views of teachers are both thorough and differentiated. Accordingly, implications for teacher training are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The practice of today's mainstream primary teachers is increasingly inclusive (UNESCO, 1994). Although the involvement of teachers in identifying and referring students with special educational needs to segregated educational settings is currently insufficient, the traditional focus on the deficits of some children increased teacher awareness of differences in student abilities, social backgrounds, learning strategies, metacognition, motivation, interest, learning strategies, (on-task) behavior (Houtveen, Booij, De Jong, & Van de Grift, 1999; Riding, 2005), and unique learning needs (Vehmas, 2010). Therefore, most teachers agree that a one-size-fits-all-approach no longer meets the standards of 21st century education (Ferguson, 2008), and question how to proactively provide differentiated instruction (Smit & Humpert, 2012; Tomlinson et al., 2003) to achieve adaptive education (Vogt & Rogalla, 2009). Currently, the key role of teachers is to address alterations needed in the learning environment (Curry, 2003) in order to provide additional learning support as needed. Practice-based models, such as needs-based assessment (Pameijer, 2006), curriculum-based assessment (Obi, 2009) and responsiveness-to-instruction (Ardoyn, Witt, Connell, & Koenig, 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007), are widely implemented to support teachers in differentiating among pupils in need (e.g., in clusters, subgroups or tiers). However, teachers are still struggling to fulfill this task. As has been stressed regularly (Humphrey et al., 2006; Lebeer et al., 2010; Talmor, Reiter, & Feigin, 2005), teaching in heterogeneous classrooms

is a major challenge. Teachers agree that students with the most significant needs will not have their educational needs met in regular classrooms without special educational support (Lopes, Monteiro, Sil, Rutherford, & Quinn, 2004); however, learning support for many of these students is nonexistent or inadequate (Mowat, 2009).

This raises questions concerning the views of teachers regarding the (additional) support needs of students and teacher approaches to meet these needs. Current studies address (a) the shift from special educational needs, towards learners' additional support needs (Lindsay, 2007; Vehmas, 2010; Wilson, 2002), (b) prevalence numbers (Croll & Moses, 2003; Lebeer et al., 2010; Pijl, Frostad, & Flem, 2008; Van der Veen, Smeets, & Derriks, 2010) and characteristics of students with additional support needs as perceived by the teacher (Anders et al., 2011; Bruggink, Goei & Koot, 2013; Van der Veen et al., 2010), or (c) literature reviews rejecting the idea of specific pedagogic approaches for students with special or additional needs. The latter recommends that solutions be sought in the frameworks of graded learning support or multi-tiered support systems, where common teaching strategies are used in more intensive, frequent or explicit ways to meet the support needs of learners (Lewis & Norwich, 2001; Lindsay, 2007; Nind & Wearmouth, 2006; Norwich & Lewis, 2007; Rix, Hall, Nind, Sheehy, & Wearmouth, 2009; Sheehy et al., 2009; Tomlinson et al., 2003). However, quantitative research to substantiate teacher views on additional learning support needs of students remains scarce. One empirical study in the Netherlands addressed this, resulting in two dimensions: the need for structure and the need for emotional support, which were related to withdrawal, emotional instability and anxiety (Meijer, Fossen, van Putten, & van der Leij, 2006). Although the findings of this study are relevant, it focused narrowly on needs related to the social-emotional

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development of students. Thus, a broad perspective on the additional support needs of learners, incorporating cognitive, social, emotional or behavioral domains (Boekaerts, de Koning, & Vedder, 2006; Meijer, 2009), is needed.

Hence, the aim of this study is to empirically substantiate additional learning support needs of students in mainstream primary education, from the perspective of teachers, and to value these views by linking them to external reference points. The study addresses two research questions. First, how do Dutch mainstream primary school teachers perceive the additional learning support needs of students? Second, how are these perceptions related to the attainment of students, teacher-perceived task-oriented behavior of students, teacher-perceived behavior of students in the classroom, and teacher-perceived relationships with students?

Answers to these questions are relevant for initial teacher training in order to prepare new mainstream teachers for their complex jobs (Florian, Young, & Rouse, 2010) of meeting a variety of additional learning support needs in everyday classrooms.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

A total of 57 teachers in Dutch mainstream primary education studying for their Bachelor of Education (86%) or Master of Special Educational Needs (14%) at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences volunteered to take part in the study (all female; mean age = 28, range 19–59; mean years of experience = 5, range 0–32). They were recruited during a course they were taking on defining the learning support needs of students. Data collection took place from September 2011 until December 2011. To identify students with additional learning support needs, participating teachers were asked: “Which of the students in your classroom are in need of additional support to achieve set educational goals?” It was made clear that educational goals could pertain to a specific teaching subject or to a student’s social, emotional or behavioral development. The question resulted in a list of teacher-identified students for each classroom, varying from three to ten students.

Then, two teacher-identified students with additional support needs (henceforth referred to as teacher-identified students) were randomly selected from each classroom for the study, resulting in a study sample of 114 students (mean age = 9 years; 48% male). About half of the teacher-identified students were scoring above the national average in mathematics (50%) and comprehensive reading (47%). Twenty percent had one or more formal diagnoses: 16% ADHD, 4% autism spectrum, 8% dyslexia, 8% language and speech problems; 64% not specified.

Finally, one student that was not teacher-identified as a student with special educational needs was selected at random from each classroom, to form a reference group. Due to non-response, a total of 43 students formed the comparison sample.

2.2. Procedures

Teachers were asked to score the additional learning support needs of students. Furthermore, teachers filled out norm-referenced questionnaires regarding the attainment of students, teacher-perceived task-oriented behavior of students, classroom behavior and teacher-perceived relationships with students. The COTAN-handbook¹ (Evers et al., 2002), which reviews the quality of Dutch diagnostic instruments in terms of reliability and validity, was consulted to select instruments with adequate psychometric properties ($\alpha > .60$), norm-referenced groups, suitability for mainstream primary education, and minimal

time requirements for completion. The instrumentation will be described in the next section.

Measures were taken to protect the young and potentially vulnerable teacher-identified students during data collection. First, the written approval of parents for their child’s involvement was required. Second, teacher-identified students were not disclosed within the classroom. Finally, the data were collected anonymously; the names of students were replaced with respondent codes.

2.3. Measures

This section describes the instrumentation, regarding 1) teacher perceptions of the additional support needs of learners, and 2) external reference points such as the attainment of students, teacher-perceived task-oriented behavior of students, classroom behavior and teacher-perceived relationships with students. All given scale internal consistency rates (Cronbach’s alphas; α) were obtained within this study.

2.3.1. Teacher perceptions of additional support needs of students

Because no reliable scales were available to measure the teacher perceptions of additional learning support needs of teacher-identified students in Dutch mainstream primary education, a list of items was compiled for this study. A well-established Dutch practice-based model on needs-based assessment (Pameijer, 2006) was used as a starting framework. This model embodies examples of additional learning support, within the categories of instruction (e.g., “the student is in need of a teacher who is modeling/thinking out loud”), assignments (e.g., “a task at or below his/her level”), activities (e.g., “activities where s/he can take responsibility”), peers (e.g., “peers who accept his/her odd behavior”), and feedback (e.g., “feedback on the effort s/he took”).

Furthermore, several relevant studies from different domains were scrutinized to select relevant examples of additional learning support for students, addressing (1) basic needs within motivational psychology (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), (2) learning functions within cognitive psychology (Shuell, 1986; Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004), (3) literature reviews on effective pedagogic approaches meeting the special educational needs of students (Nind & Wearmouth, 2006; Norwich & Lewis, 2001; Rix et al., 2009; Sheehy et al., 2009; Tomlinson et al., 2003), and (4) meta-analyses addressing effective support for students with learning problems (Gersten et al., 2009) or behavioral problems (Cooper, 2011; DuPaul & Weyandt, 2006; Evans, Harden, & Thomas, 2004; Humphrey, 2009; Niesyn, 2009; Zentall, 2005) or with respect to specific subjects, such as mathematics (Kroesbergen & Van Luit, 2003) or comprehensive reading (Berkeley, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 2010).

A total of 146 items describing the additional support needs of students were selected within the following categories: instruction (26 items; e.g., “an extended instruction”); tasks and activities (30 items; e.g., “one task at a time”); feedback and motivation (19 items; e.g., “a compliment when a task is completed”); behavioral support (26 items; e.g., “orientation on the task”); social relationships (24 items; e.g., “collaboration with peers”); and classroom management (21 items; e.g., “defined starting and ending points”). A 5-point Likert scale (“never applicable” to “often applicable”) was used. The selection was discussed with others in educational practice and research (including pre-service teachers in their final year of training (Bachelor of Education; Windesheim University of Applied Sciences; $n = 60$) and Dutch researchers ($n = 10$; 30% PhD, 70% MSc or MA) during a round table-session. An overview of items can be obtained from the first author. Further details on psychometric measures of the scales are provided in the “Results” section of this study.

2.3.2. Student attainment

Student attainment was assessed using standardized tests, which are part of the Dutch national monitoring and evaluation system, to monitor the progress of students. This system was developed by the

¹ COTAN = Commissie Testaangelegenheden Nederland van het Nederlands Instituut van Psychologen (NIP) [Commission of Testing of the Dutch Institute of Psychologists].

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