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Using Research for Informing Change in Special Education: A survey of educators

Abstract

The function of teacher education is to instill general principles which can be applied to immediate classroom needs and environmental circumstances. In order to determine the needs, current practice, and future goals of educators in Special Education, a survey was conducted through nine school boards served by the University of Ottawa in eastern Ontario. Results of 692 responses indicate that educators want more opportunities for guided, interactive application with special-needs children, more collaborative research in the various exceptionalities, and ongoing professional development with specialists at advanced levels of Special Education.

Résumé

L'objectif de la formation des enseignants est d'inculquer des principes généraux qui peuvent être appliqués aux besoins immédiats en classe et aux circonstances du milieu. Pour déterminer les besoins, les pratiques et les objectifs futurs des spécialistes de l'éducation spécialisée, un sondage a été réalisé auprès de neuf commissions scolaires desservies par l'Université d'Ottawa dans l'est de l'Ontario. Le dépouillage des 692 questionnaires remplis révèle que les éducateurs souhaitent davantage de possibilités d'applications interactives et dirigées avec les enfants aux besoins particuliers, davantage de recherches concertées sur les diverses difficultés éprouvées par les enfants et des cours de perfectionnement professionnel suivi donnés par des spécialistes à un niveau avancé de l'éducation spécialisée.

A function of good teaching is instilling in students a sense of how to apply principles to new and immediate circumstances. The function of good teacher education is to instill in educators general principles which can

then be applied to their immediate classroom needs and environmental circumstances. In order to make these principles relevant to the teachers, one must ascertain what their unique needs, teaching circumstances, and future goals may be. This paper will examine a study which collected educators' perceived needs and views on the current training programs available at one faculty of education in the field of Special Education. Implications from the data will lead to recommendations for revisions in teacher-education delivery and course content in the Special Education programs.

Rationale

Effective learning depends on a wide-based community of support. Higher education, funded in part by public money, has a responsibility to acknowledge that support by promoting collaboration with the communities it serves (Starkey, 1987). Faculties of education in conjunction with school boards and professional teachers' organizations can become a community of learners when they are willing to learn together, to refine and actively structure programs to serve each other's needs. Individuals enter into collaborative relationships when they realize that they cannot achieve their learning goals alone (Barth, 1990).

In a report to the Ontario Minister of Education and the Minister of Colleges and Universities (Teacher Education Research Committee [TERC], 1988), several recommendations highlighted the need to develop strategies to ensure collaboration within the whole education community. Incentives to facilitate the involvement of teachers in the development of teacher education courses, in collaborative action research, and in ongoing in-service programs were recommended (TERC, 1988). Goodlad (1984) spoke of an "ecosystem of institutions and agencies" that could work together to reconstruct more effective school systems. If a group of educators with a common vision of improving special education services is to be a true community of learners, then its first goal is not to react or promote random, unsubstantiated alternatives in teacher education, but rather to seek guidance, reflection, and relevant purpose from all its constituent groups.

When teaching professionals perceive themselves separate from decision-making bodies, they may feel adrift, powerless in the sea of learning that provides little support for the daily problems which they cannot voice (Benne, 1976; Glasser, 1986; Pratt, 1980). No teacher, consultant, principal, or professor of education can respond solely to someone else's vision. There must be a sense of ownership, a sense of valued input into the activities which are carried out daily in the classroom (Glasser, 1990; Hill, 1984; Fleming, & Fleming, 1983). If professional development and advanced qualifications courses are to be perceived to be valuable, recipients need to have a voice in shaping such programs (Goodlad, 1984; Lieberman, 1986; Pratt, 1986).

An invitation to collegiality can be powerfully attractive to educators who for too long have remained invisible, "absentee curriculum makers". An opportunity for contribution is a potential motivator for additional professional growth.

Such respect for educational colleagues can give them additional impetus to work towards reform because, to some degree, they have decided what change is needed and this is important to them. Control theory predicts that given such encouragement and a sense of quality inherent in what they are doing, workers will create better products than ever before. Thus, effective contact with the educational community can provide reinforcement for implementing change and can enhance commitment in the developing phases.

Methodology

In 1988-89, a survey was conducted through the University of Ottawa and its Special Education Advisory Project committee (SEAP). Members of the SEAP committee were consultants, advisory officers, treatment centre personnel, school principals, and a university professor. They represented nine school systems in the eastern region of Ontario. The survey was planned and implemented in response to school boards' requests for increased training programs for the special education teachers in the local systems served by the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa.

The SEAP committee itself arose from a perceived need for greater collaboration between the university and the school systems in eastern Ontario. The mission of SEAP was to provide liaison to agencies involved in the field of special education; to provide an information exchange to all participating partners; to provide opportunities for research in special education; and to advise in program planning and implementation of special education teacher training courses. Thus, the SEAP survey was an action taken in direct response to several of the committee's aims, namely, to gather information in order to inform and revise current teacher education in the field of special education. This paper will report the results of the survey and its general implications.

A questionnaire was devised and field-tested in several school locations. The first section of the questionnaire dealt with demographic data, namely (1) current roles of respondents, (2) years when respondents had taken Special Education courses, (3) universities at which the courses had been taken, and (4) electives in special exceptionalities which were potential courses respondents might take in the upcoming three years.

The second section dealt with the perceived quality of courses taken in Special Education, the degree of assistance from University of Ottawa per-

sonnel and other resources, opportunities for guided research, the practical applications of course principles, and course content as it applied to special education in the classroom. A four-point Likert-type scale was used for this section.

The last section contained seven open-ended questions dealing with what type of future courses respondents would prefer, suggestions for instructional mode and course content, what type of research facilities the university might make available to educators, and what specific areas of exceptionalities should be considered for advanced or intensive topics for future courses through the university. Comments regarding the survey itself were solicited.

After a field trial, minor revisions were made to the questionnaire and copies were distributed to nine regional school boards served by the University of Ottawa. Distribution to all schools was through liaison members of the Special Education Advisory committee and with the cooperation of Special Education in the school boards.

Scores for the first two sections of the questionnaire were transferred to computer-scanning sheets. Percentages of responses were computer tabulated. Statements from the open-ended questions in the last section were compiled by the committee, responses were categorized into major themes and then counted to determine emerging preferences. Individual cases of unique or unexpected perceptions were included when the content was seen by the committee as a highlight for another position.

Respondents in the survey indicated their roles as follows:

Special Education Teacher	–	37%
Regular Classroom Teacher	–	26%
Resource Teacher	–	16%
Principal	–	6%
Other (including Supervisory Officers)	–	15%

The majority of respondents (73.2%) had taken Special Education courses within the years 1979 to 1989, and 76.4% of respondents had taken their courses at the University of Ottawa. Almost twice as many people (63%) indicated interest in taking future course electives at the advanced level as those choosing basic level electives (37%).

From the respondents who had taken courses at the University of Ottawa, the message was very clear. In questions dealing with sufficient presentation of theory, 88% reported “agree or strongly agree”; that course theory related to a specialization in Special Education, 84%; and that courses attempted to address current issues and problems in Special Education, 83%.

As well, 80% of the respondents perceived a high degree of satisfaction with the current resource material available through the courses, 75% reported the same satisfaction about faculty members who were accessible in offering guidance and information, while 71% agreed or strongly agreed that the instructional modes used by faculty were useful.

When the questionnaire referred to the practical nature of courses, another strong message emerged both in the Likert-type statements and in the open-ended questions completed by respondents. Whereas 84% agreed that sufficient theory was presented, only 42% found that sufficient practicum was presented. In addition, 96% agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to be given more choice in selecting practical assignments. This was one of the strongest areas perceived to be in need of revision.

A majority of respondents (88%) perceived that more time should be spent on the field of Special Education at the Bachelor of Education level, and 90% would like to see more courses available in this field at the Master's of Education level. In addition, 88% agreed or strongly agreed that the university should make available to them opportunities for research in Special Education.

In one question which asked if respondents would take refresher courses in Special Education, 61% indicated their desire to participate. This was supported by another statement in which 63% indicated they wanted more opportunities to update their skills in Special Education. Over the next three years, 37% would choose to take electives at the basic level and 63% would take electives at the advanced level. Since 87% of respondents had already completed all of the three parts of the Special Education Advanced Qualifications program for Ontario, taking advanced level or refresher courses is the only avenue presently available.

Table 1 (p. 396) lists the open-ended questions from the survey. Over 90% of the respondents took time to write about their opinions, their reactions to university programs, and their vision for Special Education programs. They indicated a number of areas of concern and various needs for course revisions and instructional modes. The questions allowed respondents to elaborate on the issues they had rated earlier in the questionnaire. Personal comments correlated strongly with the percentages of agreement in the Likert-type statements and thus, definite patterns emerged.

Table 2 (p. 396) refers to the topics most frequently requested by educators in their Special Education courses.

There was no clear pattern for when educators would like to take Advanced Qualifications (AQ) courses. Neither weekends nor evenings emerged as a favourite time; results were almost equal for each.

Table 1
Open-ended questions from survey

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1. What kinds of courses should be given as "refresher" courses?
 2. If such courses were to run evenings or Saturdays, would you participate?
 3. Kindly give your suggestions for the instructional mode.
 4. Kindly give your suggestions for course content.
 5. What kind(s) of research facilities should the University of Ottawa make available to educators?
 6. What specific areas of exceptionality should be considered as advanced or intensive topics for courses?
 7. Your comments regarding this survey.

Table 2
Course topics ranked in order of frequency

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1. The latest research in Special Education, particularly in Canada, which was both general and specific in nature, i.e., practical strategies for teaching exceptional children in the regular classroom; specific strategies for behavioural disordered children at the secondary level.
 2. Legal aspects relevant to Special Education and teachers.
 3. The nature of testing and its applications for teachers.
 4. Behaviour management and counselling for children with different exceptionalities.
 5. The use of computers in Special Education.

When asked to give suggestions for instructional mode in AQ courses, Table 3 outlines the most frequent preferences of the respondents.

Table 3
Instructional mode ranked in order of frequency

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1. Combine lectures, case studies, small group activities, and practica.
 2. Combine research opportunities and practica.
 3. Allow small-group work based on action research undertaken by participants.
 4. Arrange for more presentations from "experts" in Special Education and more visitations to special training sites.
 5. Train for computer applications and usage in the field.
 6. Organize shared time with school boards so courses run throughout the year during school days as well as in the evening.
 7. Organize more independent self-directed study opportunities.
 8. Organize more opportunities for guided research in the field of Special Education.

There was some overlap between responses that dealt with instructional mode and course content. Suggestions as to course content within the Special Education program are found in Table 4.

Table 4
Course content ranked in order of frequency

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1. Use case studies, real children.
 2. Develop the role of the resource teacher.
 3. Train in identification procedures and observation skills for exceptional students.
 4. Include practical work with actual students.
 5. Provide access to other school systems' exemplary programs and other teachers' exemplary practices.
 6. Include current research information.
 7. Update use of current guidelines in Special Education available from the Ministry of Education.
 8. Adapt course content to specific teaching levels, i.e., Primary, Junior, Intermediate, or Secondary.
 9. Train in learning styles and how they can be applied in Special Education.

Many responses were received on the type of research resources that the university could make available to local educators. Table 5 highlights the most frequent themes that emerged from the questionnaire.

Table 5
Strategies to facilitate research ranked in order of frequency

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1. Arrange off-campus links to the university library and other resources.
 2. Arrange access to computer data banks for information and materials in Special Education both at the local and provincial levels.
 3. Set up network directories for access to people, programs, locales, etc., in Special Education.
 4. Set up mentorships and shadowing programs with "master" teachers in the field.
 5. Arrange demonstration classes.
 6. Allocate more funding for research and use teachers as research assistants.
 7. Arrange for medical personnel to assist teachers in learning about various childhood disorders, drug administration in schools.
 8. Promote regular newsletters for constituents across the field.
 9. Extend use of university library facilities to all educators upon presentation of valid teaching documentation.

In considering areas for future advanced courses, three electives were targeted by the respondents: 1) learning disabilities; 2) behavioural excep-

tionalities; and 3) the gifted learner. This prediction is supported by current enrollment figures in the three courses named.

Respondents were asked for their comments regarding the study itself and twice as many people gave positive comments as negative ones. Educators wrote that they were glad to have had the chance for input. Many indicated their hopes that real, positive change would result from the survey.

Negative comments indicated a sense of cynicism that similar surveys had never resulted in any change in the past. These respondents saw little chance for this survey to be any different.

Discussion

The survey results indicated two very strong trends. It appeared that the respondents perceived a need to remain current in the field of Special Education, and they were strongly interested in seeking ways to apply new research to classroom practice. Generating data and then using research to inform classroom applications were highlighted by the educators in this region of Ontario.

There were strong indications that they want learning experiences guided by the university to allow educators practical interaction with students who exhibit different exceptionalities. Thus, more research and more practicum opportunities were the clear areas requested for ongoing learning. Future AQ courses should offer practica because teachers are asking for them.

There was clear emphasis on using a variety of learning strategies within courses, preference for small group research opportunities, and requests for more interaction with practitioners. Teachers want courses which model the best strategies for teaching, as well as provide opportunities to learn advanced content.

When planning future programs, teacher education institutions can benefit from the data which point to three predominant areas of interest for future courses in Special Education. Electives in learning disabilities, behavioural adjustment, and the gifted learner still are in demand. This is not to suggest that teachers will not want to continue learning about other exceptionalities; minority voices deserve to be heard. Universities and school systems need to find more ways to collaborate in teacher education so that all elective areas can be most economically served, without loss of those electives which are not as frequently in demand.

A number of respondents commented that completing the questionnaire was the first opportunity they had had to give input into the field of

Special Education. Previously, their opinions had not been given a voice. These educators were eager to contribute and to know that someone would value their ideas and opinions.

Many respondents recommended that a similar survey be conducted in other fields of advanced qualifications, e.g., computers in education. Some also suggested that the survey be expanded to include more teachers who worked in Special Education part-time. Many respondents indicated a desire to see the final results of the survey. (Copies have been distributed to all participating schools.) The fact that so many educators took the time to reply to the complete questionnaire, with all its open-ended statements, indicated their sincere interest in improving teacher education practices.

Implications

The survey results indicate that educators are concerned about the future direction of Special Education programs and their own professional growth. They want learning experiences guided by the university that allow them practical interaction with different exceptionalities. They seek opportunities for personal research that will result in informed restructuring of Special Education practice in their schools.

Emerging patterns for future courses and directions for potential research suggest that it may be useful for school boards as well as universities to consider "refresher" courses and in-service in specific areas. It is clear that universities and school boards need to collaborate in efforts to improve ongoing professional development in ways guided by voices from the schools.

School systems can capitalize on interest in action research by establishing methods and procedural agreements in which collaborative research in Special Education could be undertaken. Course content must be continually updated to incorporate new research and strategies proven to be effective with special needs' learners. Both school systems and universities can work in collaboration to establish opportunities for seminars, shared-time courses during the school day, exchanges for distinguished educators, and strategic planning for ongoing professional development courses in Special Education.

Faculties of Education can expand their role by extending off-campus library links and developing regional resource directories in Special Education. The university could make access to library facilities available to all teachers in regional school boards on a cost recovery basis which could be borne by school boards. This would address many of the requests for resources in Special Education and upgrade local facilities for potential research projects.

Responses from the questionnaire reflected the reality that exceptional students are in all regular classrooms and educators want to know where to find resources or how to access specialized support for these students. Educators don't want to feel they are alone in working with an exceptional child.

Opportunities could be established for teachers to work with other Special Education mentors, to shadow practitioners in different exceptionalities, and to work on collegial teams for teacher education program revisions or curriculum research projects. Collegial teams could act as advisory bodies to faculties and school boards to ensure that Special Education personnel involved in in-service be knowledgeable and abreast of current issues in the field.

Conclusions

Results of the Special Education Survey give direction to those persons responsible for professional development of all educators. The impetus for the survey and its development came from a consortium of educators. At the University of Ottawa the results have become a vehicle for active restructuring of teacher education services. As an example, dialogue with local school boards is focusing on the development of a Special Education Directory for the region, more practica courses are being considered, and a conference to highlight Special Education teachers is in the planning stages.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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