RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teachers’ perceptions of students’ additional support needs: in the eye of the beholder?

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Nowadays, teachers are regarded as key players in the process of identifying and catering to students’ additional support needs within mainstream primary classrooms. However, teachers’ professional judgements regarding students with special needs have been found to be contextually influenced (e.g. by school context, student population, level of achievement). It is unclear whether teachers’ perceptions of their students’ actual support needs are also influenced by their personal and professional characteristics. Hence, a better understanding of the value of teachers’ perceptions regarding students’ needs is needed. Therefore, this study explored perceptions of 109 Dutch mainstream primary teachers regarding four dimensions of students’ additional support. It addressed whether these teacher-perceived students’ needs are affected by teachers’ years of experience, level of training, personality traits and self-efficacy beliefs. It was found that teachers’ perceptions of students’ needs were relatively unbiased by their personal and professional characteristics.

Keywords: elementary school teachers; educational needs; special needs students; personality traits; self-efficacy

Introduction

Teachers in mainstream primary classrooms have acknowledged for some time that students differ in terms of educational attainment, social or behavioural characteristics, as well as their educational needs requisite to accomplishing set educational goals (Riding, 2005). This is the natural order of things, but, at the same time, a professional dilemma for teachers (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012), since a one-size-fits-all approach is not sufficient. Therefore, teachers question themselves on how to proactively provide (additional) support within the classroom, thus allowing all students to benefit from lessons taught and attain set educational goals.

It follows that teachers’ professional understanding of their students’ (additional) learning support needs (Chamley, 2012) are fundamental preconditions of meeting today’s professional standards within the regular classrooms. In contrast to clinical professionals (e.g. school psychologists, psychiatrists) working in the field of education – whose job is to identify students’ needs in terms of deficits and diagnosis, if applicable – teachers are teaching. This implies that their main concern is to address students’ additional support in terms of alterations needed in the classroom. This

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