




Teaching in Focus #40

Supporting students with
special needs: A policy priority
for primary education



Teaching & Learning

Supporting students with special needs: A policy priority for primary education

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- An average of 57% of teachers across all participating countries consider supporting students with special needs in primary school a high priority for additional resources. This is significantly higher than for lower secondary teachers.
 - Although 52% of teachers in primary education have participated in professional development training on teaching students with special needs, it is an area of training that the highest percentage of teachers report needing (28%).
 - Lack of training and preparation in managing an inclusive classroom is a cause of concern for teachers' overall well-being. Results show that 38% of teachers in primary education, on average, considered that modifying lessons for students with special needs is a source for stress in their job. In most countries and economies this proportion of teachers is higher in primary than lower secondary schools.

School systems across the world are working to make the classroom more inclusive for all children, regardless of their origin and capacities, so that they have equal opportunities for quality learning. It has become essential to integrate students with special needs into mainstream formal education and they are increasingly enrolled in regular schools and classes in primary education.

Inclusive classrooms exert more and particular demands on teachers, however. TALIS 2018 data alerts us to the pressing need to support teachers with students with special needs in primary schools. Support for students with special needs is a policy priority for principals and teachers in primary schools. Modifying lessons to support students with special needs is a particular cause of stress for teachers. And a significant proportion of teachers request further training in teaching children with special needs.

Part of the demands on teachers in primary schools regarding students with special needs has to do with their unique position in being able to better detect children who have special needs, more of which will be elaborated below. From a policy point of view, early and accurate identification of students with special needs in primary education best ensures successful continuous support for their development. Education systems should develop strategic policy actions to improve the quality and number of teachers equipped to teach students with special needs who are increasingly enrolled in regular schools and classes in primary education.

What is the TALIS?

The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), established in 2008, is the first major international survey of teachers and school leaders on different aspects affecting student learning. It gives a voice to teachers and school leaders, allowing them to provide input into educational policy analysis and development in key areas.

The international target population for TALIS 2018 is lower secondary teachers and their school leaders in mainstream public and private schools. For the 2018 survey, a representative sample of 4 000 teachers and their school principals from 200 schools were randomly selected in each country. Across all survey components, approximately 260 000 teachers responded to the survey, representing more than 8 million teachers in 48 participating countries and economies.

TALIS participants had the opportunity to opt for a survey implementation in primary schools. Fifteen countries and economies decided to engage in a TALIS survey for primary education from which data is available for 12: Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (hereafter CABA [Argentina]), Denmark, England (United Kingdom), Flemish Community of Belgium, France, Japan, Korea, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Viet Nam.

Data collection took place between September and December 2017 for Southern Hemisphere participants and March to May 2018 for Northern Hemisphere participants. Since the data were collected before the COVID-19 crisis, please note that some of the frequencies and relationships among the variables reported here may have changed. More information is available at www.oecd.org/education/talis.

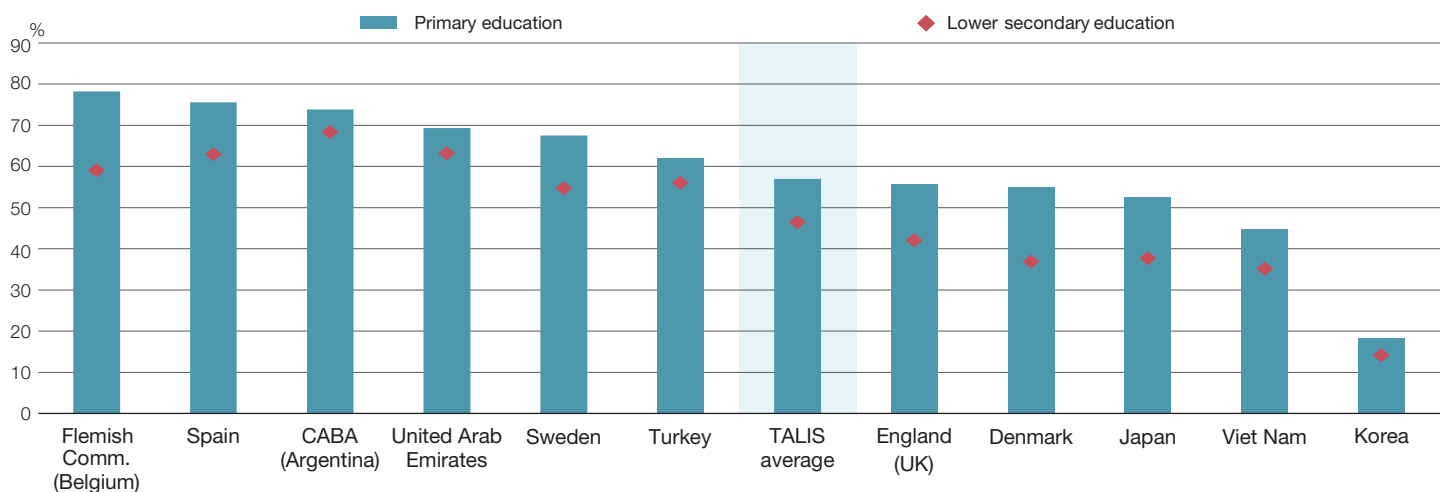
Supporting students with special needs as a policy priority

In TALIS, students with special needs are identified by school principals and teachers and are defined as “those for whom a special learning need has been formally identified because they are mentally, physically, or emotionally disadvantaged”. On average across the participants, 27% of teachers in primary education work in schools with at least 10% of students with special needs. These numbers reflect principals’ and teachers’ reports based on their own evaluations. They could be underreported as a large share of students were unidentified in early years.

Supporting students with special needs is a policy priority in primary schools. At least a third of school leaders in primary schools, on average, consider that the shortage of teachers with competence in teaching students with special needs hinders the school’s capacity to provide quality instruction “quite a bit” or “a lot”.

Some 57% of teachers, on average, in primary schools consider additional resources for teaching students with special needs a high priority. It is important to note that, compared to lower secondary education, there is a higher proportion of teachers in primary schools who consider that supporting students with special needs should be a spending priority (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Supporting students with special needs as a spending priority
Percentage of teachers who reported that supporting students with special needs is a spending priority of high importance



Note: All differences are statistically significant.

Values are ranked in descending order of the percentage of teachers in primary education who reported supporting students with special needs as a spending priority of high importance.

Source: OECD (2019), *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume I): Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1d0bc92a-en>, Tables I.3.66 and I.3.67.

Among the TALIS participants in primary education, “supporting students with special needs” ranks as the fourth priority reported by a large proportion of teachers (rated of high importance by 57% of teachers). It comes after “reducing class sizes by recruiting more staff” (66%), “improving teacher salaries” (59%) and “reducing teachers’ administration load by recruiting more support staff” (58%). Teachers in lower secondary education rank “supporting students with special needs” as the sixth priority among the other options.

Teachers in primary schools are particularly important for students with special needs

Supporting the instruction of students with special needs may be a particularly concerning issue in primary education because teachers in primary schools have more opportunities to identify a student with special needs. Teachers in primary education generally have more contact time (e.g. net teaching time) with the same group of students. They also generally teach a wider range of topics so they have a more comprehensive understanding of their students’ learning skills.

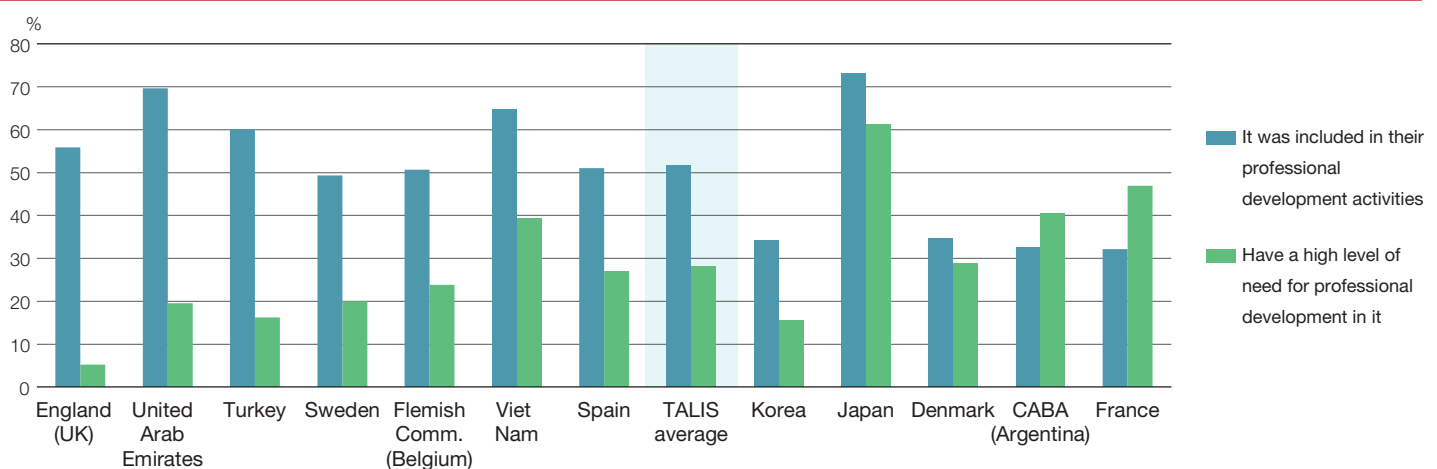
Therefore, teachers in primary schools can diagnose and identify students that require additional assistance for their learning early on. Education systems should invest in the detection and diagnosis of students with special needs by emphasising training for teachers in detecting students who need to be directed to specialists for proper diagnosis. What teachers perceive as behavioural issues (e.g. misbehaviour, low performance) could have other explanations (e.g. undiagnosed special needs). Mis-diagnosis is costly for students, teachers and education systems as a whole.

Teachers' training in supporting students with special needs

Teacher training is essential in order to both identify students with special needs and adequately support their learning in classrooms. TALIS shows that, although 52% of teachers in primary education, on average, participated in professional development activities on teaching students with special needs in the 12 months prior to completing the survey, the highest percentage of teachers still reported a high need for it (28%) (Figure 2).

Looking at the relation between in-service training and participants' reported need reveals an interesting pattern. There are cases, like in England (United Kingdom), where there is a high proportion of teachers with professional development in teaching students with special needs and a very low percentage reporting a need for this training. For CABA (Argentina), Denmark, France, and Japan, however, a high proportion of teachers have had access to this training but still report needing it.

Figure 2. Teachers' participation and need of professional development in teaching students with special needs in primary education
Percentage of teachers in primary education reporting the following regarding teaching students with special needs



Values are ranked in descending order of the gap between teachers in primary education reporting that teaching students with special needs was included in their professional development and of teachers who reported a high level of need for this training.

Source: OECD (2019), *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume I): Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1d0bc92a-en>, Tables I.5.19 and I.5.22.

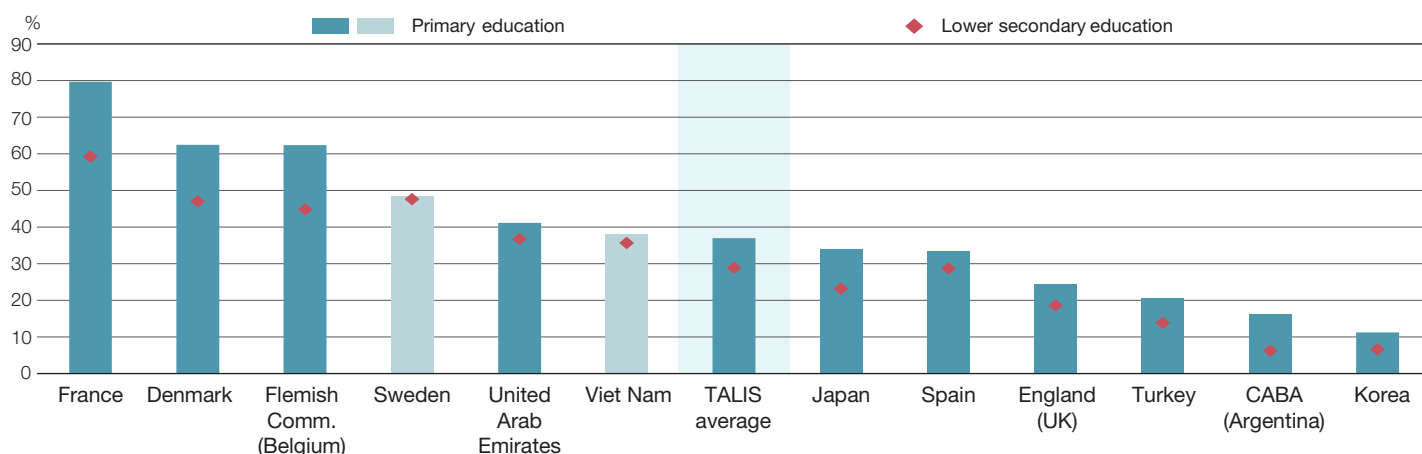
The results suggest that most teachers' need for training in teaching students with special needs remains, regardless of whether they have participated in previous training sessions or not. The need for training may emerge from concrete school and classroom demands, and/or policy requirements (e.g. national reforms requesting all "mainstream schools" enrol students with special needs) as well. Another possible explanation is that the design and implementation of in-service training for teaching students with special needs ingrains in teachers the desire to get further training. To encourage teachers to participate, specific competencies related to teaching in inclusive classrooms should be included in national standards frameworks.

The impact of lessons for students with special needs on teachers' well-being

The challenges and demands of preparing lessons for students with special needs can be daunting for teachers. TALIS 2018 shows that 38% of teachers in primary education report that modifying lessons for students with special needs is a source of stress for their job "quite a bit" or "a lot". Once again, it is possible to observe a sharp contrast between the proportion of teachers in primary schools and lower secondary schools who report this issue as a source of stress. Overall, there is a higher proportion of teachers in primary education than in lower education stating that modifying lessons for students with special needs is a source of stress "quite a bit" or "a lot"; this statement is true for all participants except Sweden and Viet Nam (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Modifying lessons for students with special needs as a source of stress

Percentage of teachers in primary education for whom modifying lessons for students with special needs is a source of stress “quite a bit” or “a lot”



Note: Statistically significant values are marked in a darker tone.

Values are ranked in descending order of the percentage of teachers in primary education who reported modifying lessons for students with special needs is a source of stress “quite a bit” or “a lot”.

Source: OECD (2020), *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume II): Teachers and School Leaders as Valued Professionals*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/19cf08df-en>, Table II.2.43 and II.2.44.

These results hint that the lack of training and the sense of a lack of preparation in addressing an inclusive classroom can create pressure and anxiety for the unprepared teacher. The results speak directly to the challenges of retaining teachers in primary schools since stress levels have a direct relation with attrition.

The stress reported by teachers could also signal that these schools do not have the necessary resources in terms of infrastructure or educational resources to support teachers in serving this population. A special financial subsidy for mainstream schools earmarked for students with special needs (e.g. for recruiting teacher aides) could improve the situation of both human and educational resources.

The bottom line

Supporting the instruction of students with special needs is a pressing policy priority in primary education. The evidence shows that many teachers in primary education feel stressed when tackling the challenges in inclusive classrooms and welcome training opportunities in their professional development programmes.

Visit

www.oecd.org/education/talis/

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For more information

OECD (2019), *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume I): Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1d0bc92a-en>.

OECD (2020), *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume II): Teachers and School Leaders as Valued Professionals*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/19cf08df-en>.

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