

Exploring the Emerging Identities of Special Needs Officers in Singapore Primary and Secondary Schools

Sirene M. Lim, Wong Meng Ee and Libby Cohen

THIS STUDY EXPLORED THE WAYS in which a group of 30 newly qualified Allied Educators (Learning & Behavioural Support), or AED(LBS), grew into their professional role within their school communities and the kinds of responsibilities they faced daily. Many of them were also the only AED(LBS) in their school. Findings revealed that these AED(LBS) took on a spectrum of roles in school and faced a range of expectations, from having to be miracle workers to being relegated to administrative support. The most well-adjusted AED(LBS) were the ones who were in school communities that had a collaborative learning culture, were supportive of students with heterogeneous needs, and were surrounded by more teachers and school leaders who had knowledge in special education.

INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of *Teach Less, Learn More* by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2005, there has been a shift away from a “one-size-fits-all” educational approach. Resources have also been channelled to widen the organizational structure of mainstream schools so as to better support teachers working with an increasingly heterogeneous group of students in both primary and secondary schools (MOE, 2008).

The Allied Educator (Learning & Behavioural Support), or AED(LBS), is one such new professional role that was introduced in 2005, then known as the Special Needs Officer.

KEY IMPLICATIONS

- The complex nature of work in school has resulted in the AED(LBS) wearing multiple hats. The nature of their professional support could be better clarified according to individual schools' needs.
- As a recent addition to the school team, the AED(LBS) needs to be better integrated into school communities in order to exchange professional knowledge with teachers.
- Like all educators, AED(LBS) need opportunities to continue their professional learning after their initial preparation at NIE.

This study is significant in contributing to a newly emerging body of research that could inform the programmes that prepare the AED(LBS) and the work of school communities. Informed by perspectives in the literature on inclusive education (e.g., Ainscow & Miles, 2008; UNESCO, 2005) we, we have learned from this study that the capabilities of the AED(LBS) and their role in schools could be more fully harnessed so that the intended promise of providing support to teachers working with students with special needs may be better delivered.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study explored the individual professional journeys of a group of AED(LBS) and their work responsibilities as they entered schools with their new qualification, often as the only person taking on the AED(LBS) role.

We had 30 voluntary participants from the 2009–2010 Diploma in Special Education cohort. Transcripts of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were the primary source of data, along with collected artefacts. Before the interviews were scheduled, we administered an online survey that yielded several categories of information, which was later clarified or disconfirmed during interviews.

Our qualitative data analyses involved both open and focused coding of the transcripts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), informed by literature such as Gee's use of identity as an analytic lens (2001), Lave and Wenger's concept of situational learning (1991), Ainsworth and Miles's discussion of inclusive education as defined in different contexts (2008), and Spillane's notion of distributed leadership (2005). We also referred to the body of paraprofessional literature from the United States.

KEY FINDINGS

Spectrum of Roles

Our analysis revealed that all the AED(LBS) found themselves wearing multiple hats in schools. Perhaps this is inevitable given the nature of their direct contact with students, families and teachers. The AED(LBS) roles include that of special educator, individual tutor, student counsellor, parent counsellor, social worker, advocate, community partner, teacher-collaborator, teacher assistant, teacher-resource,

consultant to teachers, relief teacher, and administrative support.

Some of these roles seemed to contradict the rhetoric of the AED(LBS) scheme which states that they are to support teachers in working with students with special needs. However, the form of "support" that the AED(LBS) participants took on seemed to be broadly defined across schools.

Some schools expected the trained AED(LBS) to be a miracle worker in "fixing" students with special needs, while other schools doubted their professional training and gave them little or no opportunity to share knowledge with teachers and families. This apparent vagueness of the AED(LBS) role has resulted in an enigmatic gamut of professional experiences among the 30 participants.

Although such role confusion has been reported in the United States (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001), it would be undesirable for the AED(LBS) in Singapore to continue swimming against the tides of professional ambiguity.

Active Learning Professionals

Many of the participants stressed the importance of their continued professional learning in order to cater to the diverse needs of students. They were always conscious of their limited knowledge acquired during their two-semester, full-time diploma programme at NIE and subsequent training at either the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS) or the Autism Resource Centre.

Several AED(LBS) created online communities to share teaching ideas, resources and strategies, using forums such as Yahoo! Groups and Facebook, as well as regular emails and meetings. The following quotes from the participants illustrate the extent of their continued learning and persistence in maximizing every learning opportunity:

Our school accepts all different kinds of kids... I was trained in DAS, [but] this student's an ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder] case, I did not know where to begin. I contacted my classmates who were trained in autism. I keep in touch with them to consult them on ASD strategies and resources. I do not disclose student names but we discuss symptoms and behaviour intervention techniques.

I feel that all strategies can be used. I feel that if we were trained in the strategies that teachers use to teach English or Maths, it would be very helpful. I volunteered to sit in for the curriculum workshop [conducted in school] to see what exactly it is about and what the teachers are learning.

All the AED(LBS) we interviewed were actively learning to work with students, parents and teachers even though some of them claimed to have low status in their schools, had teachers who were too busy to work with them, or principals who did not understand special education. Their ongoing learning has been situational in every sense of the concept (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Many of them were passionate in trying different ways to support their students and advocating that teachers understand their students' conditions and accommodate particular needs.

Potential Contributors to Communities of Practice

The way in which individual AED(LBS) fitted in with their school organizations was dependent on various factors—how knowledgeable they were in their area of work, how proactive they were in sharing that knowledge, how much their teacher-colleagues were aware of special educational needs, and how their colleagues viewed them and were willing to collaborate with them as professionals with equal status.

School culture and leadership style influenced the way in which an AED(LBS) contributed in the school community. Here is a representative quote from an AED(LBS) who shared how her school had welcomed her as part of the community, respected her need to grow and acknowledged her professional knowledge, recognizing that it would complement the work of mainstream teachers.

I don't really have problems because my mentor said I can use her things. Other manipulatives I can borrow from other departments... This school is such that our culture, we help each other to grow professionally because my principal's policy is that... It is good that there are some teachers who understand us AEDs. They see that they really need us to be there to support the children with special needs and difficulties. And this school, majority of my HODs have been trained as TSNs ["Teachers trained in Special Needs"], they are all TSN-trained.

Some schools that appeared to be less supportive towards students with special needs also faced multiple administrative and organizational challenges that needed to be solved collaboratively by key personnel such as the AED(LBS), Heads of Department, and Learning Support Co-ordinators (LSCs). Some of these challenges include:

1. understanding student differences that appear in the form of disabilities;
2. learning to identify students with additional needs;
3. creating and managing a database of students diagnosed with disabilities;
4. having a referral system that works;
5. setting up a case management team to regularly and systematically look into the progress of individual students; and
6. being result-oriented while having a culture of acceptance and accommodation towards diverse student characteristics and needs.

IMPLICATIONS

For Policy and Research

The building of a new generation school team to cater to the 21st century school population requires more than mere structural change. School cultures need to also be more open towards student diversity, including those with special needs, despite our competitive environment. In order to cater to a changing student profile, all schools ought to cultivate "learnership" in which the responsibility of learning and leading is diffused away from a few central individuals (Cooksey, 2003).

In research, more in-depth case studies of the nature of support offered to primary and secondary school students with special needs would be necessary. These would contribute to an open discussion and debate about whether Singapore schools need to be more explicitly inclusive in its policies and practices—to clarify and define "inclusive practices" through a common code of ethics in its mainstreaming of students with special needs, albeit in ways that are socially just and yet appropriate to the local situation (Ainsworth & Miles, 2008).

For Practice

Effective support for students with heterogeneous needs can be improved through continued learning and collaboration among AED(LBS) and teachers. Now that schools are resourced with different expert

roles in the form of AED(LBS), schools as professional communities need to integrate these expert roles so they collaborate towards common goals.

The AED(LBS) have the potential to become resource persons and significant connectors to families and external specialists (Chopra et al., 2004), but only if they are given the opportunity to grow into such a role within schools-as-learning-organizations.

Individual schools have to decide on the distribution of leadership (Spillane, 2005) and improve schoolwide planning (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2003). Schools have to (1) clarify the roles of the various AED(LBS) in relation to that of teachers and others such as the LSCs; (2) decide on mentor–mentee relationships; (3) put in place necessary systems and processes such as a database of students with identified or suspected special needs; and (4) establish purposeful and functional committees such as case management teams to regularly monitor student progress (beyond misbehaviours).

For Professional Learning

As a growing team of professionals, AED(LBS) deserve to have a coherent and long-term professional learning framework and more avenues for professional sharing with others such as teachers, therapists, counsellors and educational psychologists. If they are to continue working directly with students and families, they need to keep building their professional toolbox, given the breadth and known limitations of their initial preparation. Within the NIE teacher preparation and other programmes, there could be greater inclusion of information on working with students with special needs made available to all pre-service and in-service teachers.

At present, only an exclusive 10–20% of school teachers are eligible for TSN modules offered by NIE. It is arguable that the TSN may not reap the desired returns since it is like a “weekend approach”

to teacher learning, where individuals are expected to return after short courses to combat the status quo in their own schools (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001).

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sirene M. LIM and *WONG Meng Ee* are Assistant Professors with the Early Childhood and Special Needs Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Libby COHEN was a Visiting Professor at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Contact Sirene at sirene.lim@nie.edu.sg for more information about the project.

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