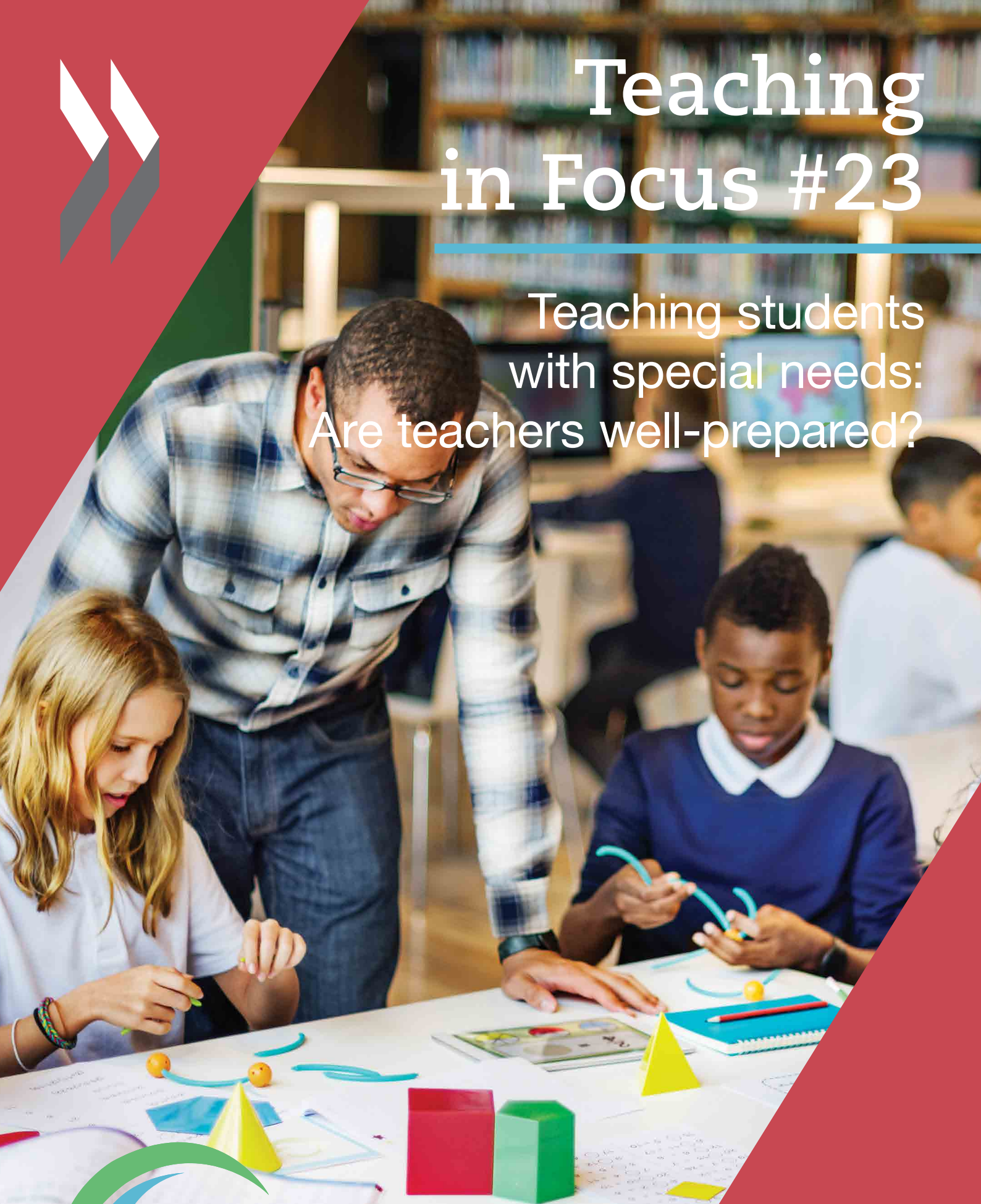
Teaching in Focus #23

Teaching students with special needs: Are teachers well-prepared?



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Teaching students with special needs: Are teachers well-prepared?

- TALIS 2013 results show that 20% of teachers across 25 OECD participating countries express a high need for professional development in teaching students with special needs.
- On average across 25 OECD countries in TALIS, only 27% of teachers who participated in a professional development programme on special needs education in the year prior to the survey reported that it had a large positive impact on their teaching practice.
- In schools where principals consistently take actions to support and improve teaching practice, teachers reported higher levels of preparedness and lower professional development needs in teaching students with special education needs.

What is TALIS?

TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Survey) is the first international survey examining teaching and learning environments in schools. It asks teachers and school principals about their work, their schools and their classrooms. This cross-country analysis helps countries identify others facing similar challenges and learn about their policies.

TALIS 2013 focused on lower secondary education teachers and their principals. It sampled 200 schools in more than 30 countries and 20 teachers in each school.

In TALIS, special needs students are reported by teachers as those who have been formally identified to have mental, physical or emotional disadvantage.

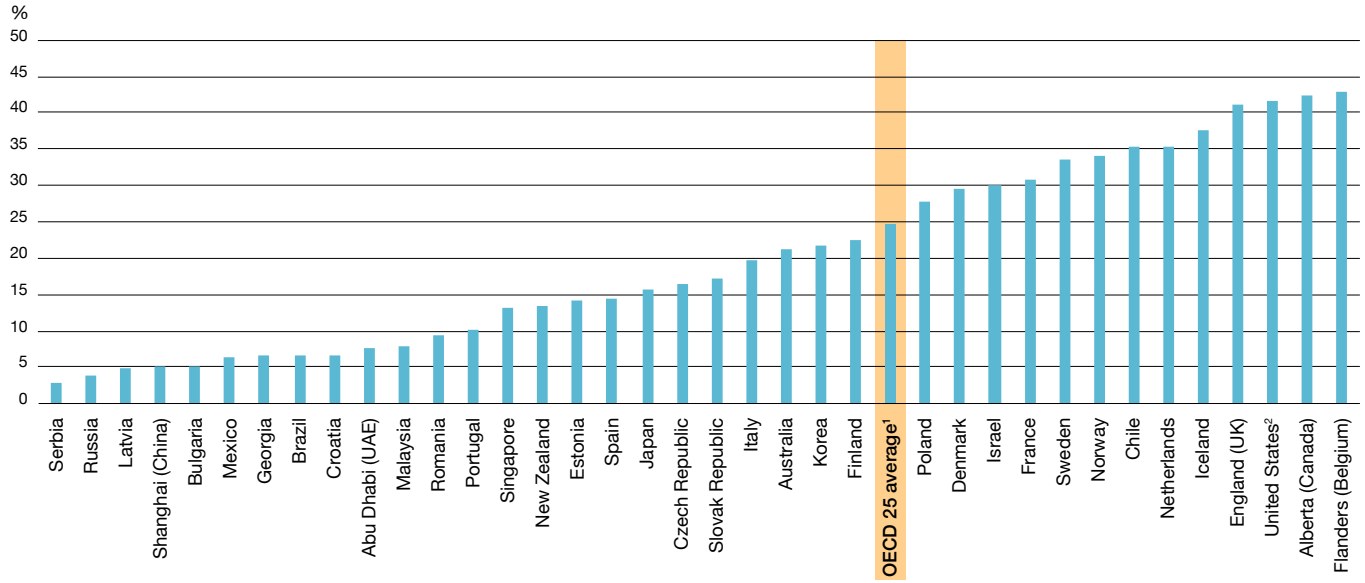
More information is available at: www.oecd.org/talis

What is inclusive education?

The demands of today's classrooms emerge from the diversity of learners that comprise them. A part of this diversity is explained by students with special needs for whom traditional teaching and learning practices may not always be sufficient or adapted. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) definition, inclusive education means providing "…real learning opportunities within the regular school system for groups who have traditionally been excluded, such as children with disabilities and speakers of minority languages." (UNICEF, 2017). As school systems move towards integrated classrooms, it is essential to support teachers by providing them with adequate training in classroom management, pedagogy and content suited for special needs students.

TALIS 2013 indicates that, across the 25 OECD countries participating in the study, 25% of teachers are teaching in more challenging, high-need classrooms (Figure 1). These are identified as classrooms with more than 10% of students with special education needs. Furthermore, 54% of teachers, on average, across 25 OECD countries teach in classrooms with 1% to 10% of students with special needs. It is important to note that TALIS data on classroom composition are based on students whose special learning needs have been formally identified because they are mentally, physically, or emotionally disadvantaged. However, this definition varies across countries, and there may be many other students whose special needs remain unidentified because of lack of expertise or resources in this domain among educators and society in general. Thus, cross-country comparison should be done carefully.

Figure 1. Percentage of teachers teaching in high-need classrooms (more than 10% of students with special education needs)



1. OECD 25 is the arithmetic mean across all OECD countries, excluding Austria, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, Slovenia, Switzerland and Turkey.
2. The data from the United States should be interpreted carefully. This is because the United States did not meet the international standards for participation rates and, as such, was not considered in the OECD average for TALIS (for more information, see OECD, 2014).
Source: OECD (2013), *Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS): 2013 complete database*, http://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?datasetcode=talis_2013%20.

Several school-level factors shape the quality of learning and teaching for special needs students in inclusive classrooms. TALIS 2013 results show that, across all participating systems, teachers who teach a larger number of students with special needs are employed in less supportive and collaborative, as well as low-resourced, school environments. Students in high-need classrooms are more likely to be taught by less-experienced teachers and by those who have received less training than teachers in other classrooms. TALIS 2013 data also indicate that teachers change more frequently in more challenging classrooms, which results in special needs students experiencing a new teacher more often. This causes learning discontinuities for special needs students, putting them at a further disadvantage.

These factors make it necessary to evaluate the preparedness of school systems and teachers to cater to special needs students in terms of instructional practices and school facilities. The following sections shed light on the current situation in this regard, as well as the key levers that can significantly improve preparedness.

Creating inclusive classrooms: are teachers and schools well-prepared?

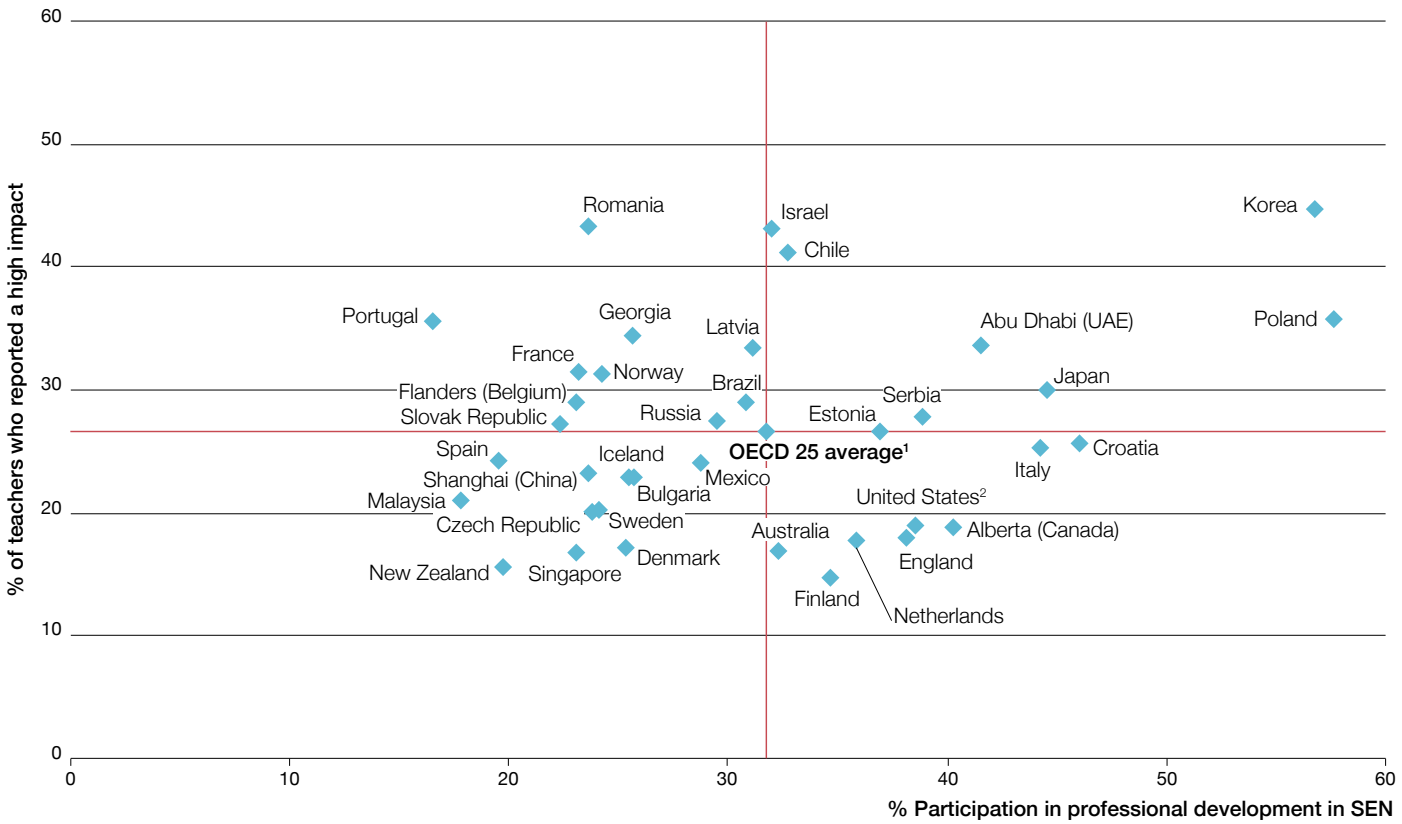
Special needs education training emerges as the highest need area expressed by teachers among 14 TALIS professional development areas. Across the 25 OECD countries and economies that participated in TALIS 2013, 20% of teachers expressed a high need for professional development in special needs education. Furthermore, there is a strong positive association between teachers teaching in more challenging classrooms and teachers expressing a need for training in special needs education. For instance, across all systems, the odds of teachers in classrooms with more than 30% of special needs students expressing a need for training in special needs education are 2.2 times more than the odds of teachers in classrooms with no special needs students expressing such a need. As many students with special needs remain unidentified formally, it is essential to equip teachers with the skills to identify the signs of students with special needs in order to adequately support their learning in classrooms.

The evidence shows that many teachers do not feel prepared enough to tackle the challenges emerging in inclusive classrooms, and would consider participating in such opportunities in their professional development programmes.

Are there opportunities for teachers to be trained in special needs education?

TALIS 2013 results not only show a high training need for teachers teaching special needs students, they also highlight the participation of teachers in professional development activities focusing on this area. On average across the 25 OECD countries participating in TALIS, only 32% of teachers participated in training for special needs education in the year prior to the survey. There are, however, important variations in participation rates across countries: the highest participation rate (60%) is observed in Korea, while rates below 30% are found in half of the countries and economies. One of the most striking observations from TALIS is that only a small percentage (27%) of teachers who participated in special needs education training felt that such programmes had a large positive impact on their teaching practice. In Israel, Portugal and Romania, even though teacher participation in special needs education training programmes was not very high, the percentage of teachers who reported it to be highly impactful was above the average reported across the 25 OECD TALIS countries (Figure 2). These figures draw attention to the pressing need to develop quality professional development programmes in special needs education.

Figure 2. Participation and reported high impact of previous professional development in special needs education



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Source: OECD (2013), *Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS): 2013 complete database*, http://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?datasetcode=talis_2013%20.

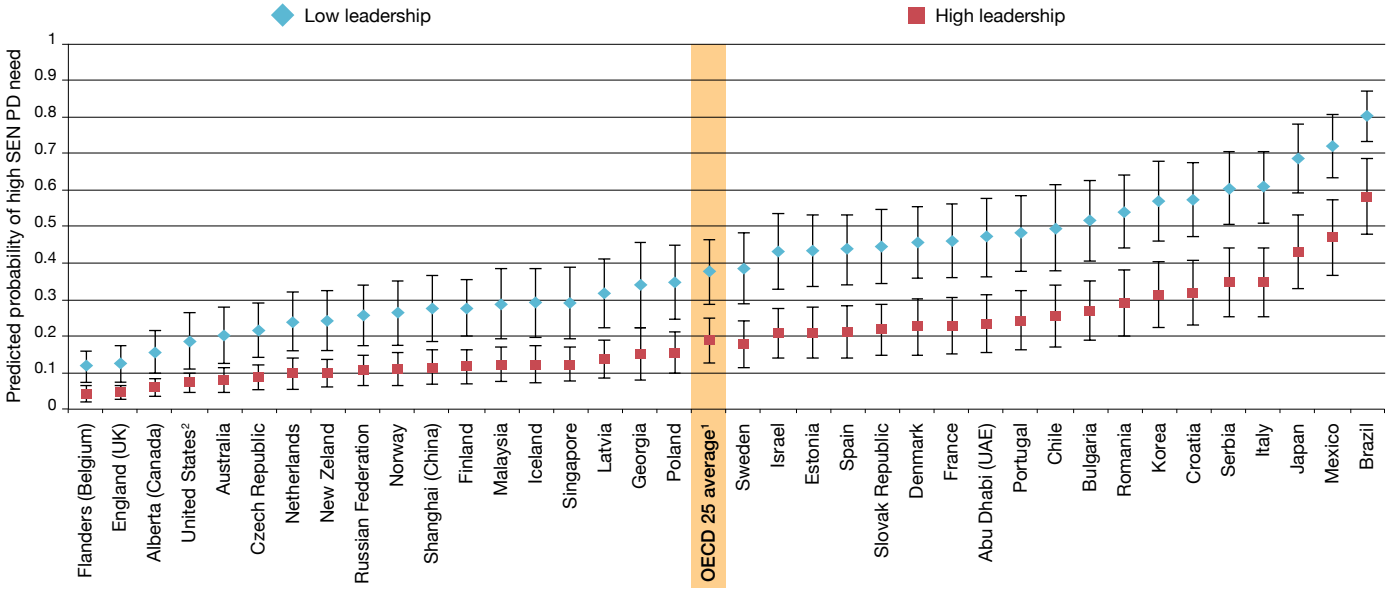
How can teachers be better supported to teach special needs students?

It is imperative that special needs education is included at both the pre-service and in-service stages of teachers' professional development. Inclusive education is a fairly new concept with important insights into identifying students with special needs, management in high-need classrooms, effective pedagogical approaches for teachers, and parental involvement. Teachers must be introduced to these topics and invited to share their classroom experiences. This can engage them in the process and potentially make such programmes more impactful. Furthermore, schools

with identified high-need classrooms should be allocated teachers for consistent periods of time and supported with resources and continuous learning throughout the academic year.

Instructional leadership for school principals is another key lever in improving preparedness for inclusive education. School principals should be supported to be instructional leaders, and collaborative professional development programmes for special needs education should be designed at the school level. The rationale for this approach comes from the observed negative association across countries between the instructional leadership of principals and the probability of a teacher expressing the need for professional development in special needs education. In schools with greater instructional leadership, teachers have lower odds of professional need in this area (Figure 3), implying that teachers in these schools feel better prepared to teach in inclusive classrooms. In TALIS 2013, instructional leadership is understood as the frequency that the principal is able to work with teachers in their pedagogical instruction and make them feel committed to the students' learning and accountable for their results. Therefore, where these types of strong leadership are present, teachers may feel less need of professional development support since they are already getting it from their school principal.

Figure 3. Association between instructional leadership and professional development need in teaching special education needs students



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Source: OECD (2013), *Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS): 2013 complete database*, http://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?datasetcode=talis_2013%20.

The bottom line

The teacher workforce could be better prepared to cater to the learning needs of special needs students. The low percentage of teachers reporting a positive impact from their professional development signals that there is more to be done regarding the quality of the training offered in special needs education. Also, allocating more experienced and trained teachers to high-need classrooms, and providing continuous support to teachers and schools, can improve the quality of learning experiences of special needs students. This is important to ensure equal learning opportunities for all children and to create the conditions necessary for students with special needs to succeed.

Visit

www.oecd.org/talis

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To learn more

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