

INNOVATIVE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM FOR PROFESSIONALS IN DEAF EDUCATION

Dr. Chantal Gervedink Nijhuis* & Ellen Vinks

Royal Dutch Kentalis, Kentalis Academy-Learning and Development

**Corresponding author. Email: c.gervedinknijhuis@kentalis.nl*

ABSTRACT

In various countries like The Netherlands, pre-service education does not prepare teachers for a job in the field of Deaf education. Consequently, professional development programs are needed by teachers working with deaf children to gain the specific knowledge and skills. Regular professional development programs turn out to be less effective because of the diverse learning needs and possibilities of these teachers, the wide range of individual needs of deaf children, and continuous developments in the field. Therefore, a more adaptive and innovative professional development program for teachers in Deaf education is designed and implemented in our organization. This study evaluates the design and implementation of an adaptive and innovative professional development program for teachers in Deaf education. An explorative study approach is adopted in which mainly qualitative data collection methods are used. Results show that teachers preferred to do only parts of the entire program. They appreciated the program design, especially the content and variety of learning activities like readings, coaching, learning on-the-job, and classroom lessons ('blended learning'). The e-learning elements increased their motivation and supported them to apply what they learned into their own teaching practices. They wished that the program could be even more adaptive. The outcomes of this study indicate the relevance and positive experiences with a more tailor-made and innovative professional development program which strongly relates to the specific learning needs and challenges of professionals in Deaf education. Design guidelines to further improve professional development programs in Deaf education are provided.

INTRODUCTION

The need for professional development

Teaching learners who are deaf and who may have other additional disabilities is complex and demanding. Specific expertise is required from teachers about aspects such as communication and language acquisition, Deaf culture, interventions and tools, to support and facilitate this group of learners in their personal growth. Teachers of deaf learners should be professionals who constantly seek the best solutions that make the greatest contribution to the learning. Sheetz and Martin (2008) identified six characteristics of outstanding teachers in Deaf education:

- Employing cognitive strategies;
- Being up to date;
- Having a passion for teaching;
- Working collaboratively;
- Demonstrating strong communication skills; and
- Creating independent learners.

In some countries, the expertise can be learned in regular pre-service teacher training programs, in other countries in-service education at teachers' workplace is offered. Generally the main focus of pre-service and in-service programs for teachers in Deaf education is put on the learning of theory, sign language skills and wide-ranging competences in teaching children with all types of disabilities. In other words, there are few educational programs in Deaf education in which teachers can learn truly specific, hands-on, practice-oriented knowledge and skills needed to raise and educate deaf children.

Moreover, the role of teachers in Deaf education is rapidly changing, as well as the classroom settings, the demographics of the learners, and the possibilities offered by technologies such as cochlear implants (Archbold, 2010; Lenihan, 2010). The tendency to include deaf learners in mainstream education has also a high impact on the support and learning needs of both deaf learners and their teachers. Freire (2009) mentioned the hurdles

of the inclusion of deaf learners in regular education like the difficulty for deaf learners to develop sign language skills and a positive identity within a dominant hearing context, but also the lack of fully sign bilingual teachers, the inadequate training of regular teachers for teaching deaf learners, and the social integration problems and difficulties for deaf learners trying to keep up with the same classroom rhythm as their hearing peers. These changes and challenges not only demand adaptations in pre-service teacher training programs (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006) but also underline the importance of additional professional development programs for teachers to become lifelong learners and quality professionals (Kwakman & Van den Berg, 2004).

Professional development programs

Professional development programs are aimed at improving specific aspects of professional practice. In general, high-quality professional development programs for teachers and administrators (Sparks, 2002):

- focus on deepening teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skills;
- include opportunities for practice, research, and reflection;
- are embedded in educators' work and take place during the school day;
- are sustained over time; and
- are founded on a sense of collegiality and collaboration among teachers and between teachers and principals in solving important problems related to teaching and learning.

Timperley (2008) emphasized the importance of creating conditions that are suitable to the ways in which teachers (and other professionals) learn, and Little (2007) addressed the autonomy of the teachers as learners, that is characterized by the active involvement of teachers in the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of their learning. Professional development becomes more learner-driven, incorporating elements such as mentoring, coaching, group assessments, e-learning, and the use of Learning Management Systems. Blended Learning programs in which different learning activities are combined (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007) create new possibilities and flexibility for learning and facilitate constructivist, collaborative and community learning (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998; Holmes & Gardner, 2006; Jochems, Van Merriënboer, & Koper, 2004; Martens, Gulikers, & Bastiaens, 2004). In other words, blended learning increases the scope for program designers and instructors to develop effective professional development programs that address the learning and interaction needs of professionals.

To address the needs for in-service training and blended learning especially for teachers supporting deaf or hard-of-hearing learners, our organization Royal Dutch Kentalis recently developed a professional development program in which more adaptive and innovative elements were incorporated. This program may serve as an advanced example of professional development for teachers (and other professionals) in Deaf education.

Professional development program for teachers of deaf learners at Kentalis

Royal Dutch Kentalis is a national organization in the Netherlands that provides care and education for deaf and hard-of-hearing persons, persons who are deaf and blind, persons who have serious speech and language difficulties, and persons who have autism, sometimes combined with intellectual disorders (see www.kentalis.nl). The 4,600 Kentalis professionals are all expected to be well educated, professionally trained, and responsive to the latest developments in the field. Since pre-service training programs in The Netherlands do not cover the specific expertise needed at Kentalis, two-year in-service professional development programs were developed for each type of job in combination with each specific target group of Kentalis. The professional is expected to take responsibility for his or her own development and to complete a professional development program suiting his or her job and target group(s) within the first two (sometimes three) years of their career at Kentalis. Of course, this does not absolve the professional's responsibilities to further develop expertise throughout his or her career. Kentalis facilitates the professional development programs in terms of training time and facilities involved, like access to the Learning Management System in which the programs are offered. Different programs were developed by senior

professionals and specialists from Kentalis with specific expertise in the type of job and target group(s) at hand. Main design principles for all programs were that they should include the core principles, theories, skills and attitudes needed; are directly relevant and useful for the day-to-day work of the professionals; combine various adaptive and innovative learning methods and activities (blended learning); are divided into different, generally agreed parts so that the professional can learn the right things at the right moment ('just-in-time'). The last mentioned design principle also creates the opportunity for parents, partner organizations, and other professionals to follow parts of the professional development programs.

The professional development program for the job Teacher working with the target group Deaf and hard-of-hearing incorporates the following parts in both training years (basis and advanced), that represent different innovative learning activities and specific expertise needed for the particular job and target group:

- Self-study (42 study hours): Knowledge about various subjects, for example deafness, language and communication, social and emotional development, and daily practices at a school for deaf learners, is offered by written study materials (first training year) in combination with e-learning modules (second training year). Especially the e-learning modules include information and explanations, but also short films, case descriptions, and knowledge quizzes.
- Classroom lessons (24 study hours): the knowledge gained in Self-study is linked to the teachers' own experiences and further explained, discussed, and practiced in classroom lessons by different learning activities like role plays, real life cases, presentations, and instruction to foster deeper insights and the learning of skills and attitudes.
- Mentoring (28 study hours): Daily practices as a teacher in Deaf education are trained at the workplace by means of an introduction program and short practical assignments coached by a mentor. This mentor is usually a colleague from the same school who has completed a course specifically developed at Kentalis for (future) mentors in which principles of coaching and professional development are addressed.
- Interaction and communication support (15 study hours): apart from mentoring, daily practices related to interaction and communication with deaf learners are trained at the workplace by means of self-made videos. Together with the Interaction and communication coach, these videotapes are watched, discussed, and reflected on. The reflection process and concrete suggestions help to further improve the skills and attitudes of the teachers.
- Sign language learning (41 study hours): skills to use sign language are trained by means of a sign language learning program combining self-study and classroom lessons. Especially in the e-learning modules of the self-study, innovative multimedia applications are used like the opportunity of teachers to compare their signs with the signs made by a native signer.

STUDY PURPOSE AND METHOD

Purpose and research questions

Kentalis developed the professional development program for teachers in Deaf education in 2012-2013. Thereafter, the program was offered to teachers of deaf learners who just started working at Kentalis and to other (groups of) professionals who were interested to do some parts of the program. This year, the program was evaluated to find out whether the program's content and learning activities really suited the learning needs of the teachers in practice. The research questions were:

1. What are the teachers' experiences with the content and innovative learning activities of the professional development program?
2. How can the professional development program and its implementation in practice be improved?

Method

Since the program was offered for just one year, an explorative study approach seemed to be most suitable in which mainly qualitative data collection methods were used. By means of a compulsory evaluation questionnaire uploaded in the Learning Management System of Kentalis, teachers' first reactions about the content and set-up of the learning activities were collected just after completing each program part. For example, the following questions were asked: What is your opinion about the content? What is your opinion about the level of instruction? Do you expect to apply the learned knowledge, skills, and attitudes in your daily practices? Do you have further comments or suggestions for improvement? Overall, 5 teachers filled in the questionnaire about Self-study of the first training year, 20 teachers about Self-study of the second training year. 15 Teachers filled in the questionnaire about Interaction and communication support, 48 teachers filled in the questionnaire about the Sign language learning. No data could be collected about Mentoring since that program part was not evaluated by the use of the Learning Management System, and evaluation data about Classroom lessons were not available because teachers did not subscribe to this part of the program.

RESULTS

Results showed that no single teacher completed the entire professional development program. Parts of the program which were done by teachers were Self-study, Interaction and communication support, and Sign language learning. In the evaluation questionnaire teachers pointed out that they liked the self-study. Although the written study materials provided in the self-study of both training years were appreciated for their completeness and interesting information about different subjects, comments were made about the large amount of reading in the first training year and the variety in difficulty and readability of the documents in both training years. This challenged the readers' concentration, motivation, and reading time. The study load of the self-study in the second training year was experienced as too much, but the combination of readings, films, knowledge quizzes, and examples of good practices was highly valued. Teachers wished to make the self-study more adaptive to their learning needs, prior knowledge, and personal interests, and suggested to transform the readings of the first training year into e-learning.

Evaluation of Interaction and communication support showed that this part of the program was much appreciated. Teachers praised the powerful process of learning and reflection based on videos, the usefulness and applicability of what was learned in practice, and the adaptability to their own learning process and work situation. Points of improvement were better structured course documentary and the planning of the sessions. When the period of time between sessions was too long, the 'learning momentum' and concentration was missing; when the period of time was too short, teachers did not have enough time and opportunities to make the videos.

The reactions on Sign language learning were also particularly good. The content, structure and flexibility of the self-study by means of e-learning modules were experienced as appropriate and the included videos as very useful and related to the daily practice of working with deaf learners. The possibility to view and review the videos as many times as needed, to record own sign language skills, and to imitate and compare with signs made by experts, was mentioned as one of the strongest aspects of this program part. One of the teachers said: "it was really nice to have the e-learning modules, since I can do them at home. By making the content more visually oriented through films in which sign language is used, the learning was less exhausting and that accelerated my learning process". The classroom lessons were perceived as very useful in combination with the self-study. At the end, teachers learned many sign language skills and felt rather comfortable in signing in a relative short time and wished to learn even more! Suggestions for improvement were to include even more variety in types and level of assignments, the possibility to get some signs and lists of signs on paper, and more theory and grammar, and to reduce the number of technical problems in the Learning Management System and e-learning modules.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The development and evaluation of the Kentalis professional development program for teachers in Deaf education illustrated the way in which in-service programs can be offered in addition to pre-service education. Teachers' experiences were quite positive with those parts of the program which took place at the workplace, included innovative multimedia applications, could be done in their private time or at their own place, and could be adapted to teachers' own learning needs and work situation. The e-learning in Self-study, the integration of videos in Interaction and communication support, and the combination of e-learning and multimedia applications with classroom lessons in the Sign language learning, were much appreciated. This emphasizes the importance and positive effects of blended learning, high autonomy for the learners, and the integration of innovative learning activities in professional development. Unfortunately, no information could be collected about experiences with the entire program. Possible reasons might be that Kentalis did not attract many new teachers last year for whom the program was initially meant or that doing the professional development program in combination with a job simply led to too much work load. Particularly within the context of serious changes taking place in Deaf education in The Netherlands toward the inclusion of deaf learners in regular education, teachers are under pressure. Based on the study outcomes, three design guidelines were formulated to further improve the professional development program for teachers working with deaf learners at Kentalis and other professional development programs in Deaf education: the programs should be very adaptive to learners' learning needs, study time and place, personal interests, and work situations; should incorporate videos supporting the process of learning and personal reflection; should create room for unlimited practicing without consequences.

REFERENCES

- Archbold, S. (2010). Deaf education: Changed by Cochlear Implantation? Nijmegen: University Medical Centre.
- Bonk, C., and Cunningham, D. (1998) Searching for learner-centered, constructivist, and sociocultural components of collaborative educational learning tools. In C. J. Bonk, & K. S. King (Eds.), *Electronic collaborators: Learner-centered technologies for literacy, apprenticeship, and discourse* (pp. 25-50). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Freire (2009). Creating inclusive learning environments: Difficulties and opportunities within the new political ethos. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 14(1), 131-135.
- Holmes, B., and Gardner, J. (2006). *E-learning: Concepts and Practice*. London: Sage.
- Jochems, W., Van Merriënboer, J., and Koper, R. (2004). *Integrated e-learning: Implications for Pedagogy, Technology, and Organization*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Kwakman, K., and Van den Berg, E. (2004). Professionele ontwikkeling als kennisontwikkeling door leraren: Naar een betere interactie tussen praktijk en theorie. *Velon, Tijdschrift voor Lerarenopleiders*, 25(3), 6-12.
- Lenihan, S. (2010). Trends and challenges in teacher preparation in deaf education. *Volta Review*, 110(2), 117-128.
- Little, D. (2010). Learner autonomy, inner speech and the European Language Portfolio. 14th International Conference of Applied Linguistics, selected paper.
- Littlejohn, A., and Pegler, C. (2007). *Preparing for Blended E-learning*. New York: Routledge.
- Martens, R.L., Gulikers, J., and Bastiaens, T. (2004). The impact of intrinsic motivation on e-learning in authentic computer tasks. *Journal of Computer Assisted learning*, 20(5), 368-376
- Mitchell, R.E., and Karchmer, M.A. (2006). Demographics of deaf education: More students in more places. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 151(2), 95-104.
- Sheetz, N., and Martin, D. (2008). National study of master teachers in deaf education: Implications for teacher education. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 153(3), 328-343.
- Sparks, D. (2002). *Designing powerful professional development for teachers and principals*. Oxford: National Staff Development Council.
- Timperley, H. (2008). *Teacher professional learning and development*. Belley: Imprimerie Nouvelle Gonnet.