

Creating enabling environment for inclusion of students with developmental disabilities

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Abstract

Students with developmental disabilities live in the same communities with everyone else. It is not justifiable to then separate them when it turns up to be in educational setting. They have to learn in the same schools and classrooms with everyone else. An enabling environment that is welcoming have to created within the educational settings with teachers who are prepared with the relevant and effective teaching skills of the inclusive classes in which those with developmental disabilities are part, which this paper aims at doing.

Introduction

Various references have been put forward for learners with developmental disabilities. These are mentally retarded, mentally handicapped, intellectually challenged, and mentally disable among other several descriptions. Some of the terms are still in use despite the arguments that some of the terms convey some labeling effects. In this paper such individuals are referred to as having developmental disabilities as this arguably conveys a lighter negative connotation as the person is viewed first before the disability. Developmental disability encompasses not only the mental capabilities but all the shortcomings such language, independent living and learning deficits (Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). UNESCO (2001:54) defines individuals with developmental disabilities as those people 'that are slower to develop physically, acquire language, and learn to look after themselves and in mastering academic skills. The definition depicts that students with developmental disabilities usually have slow cognitive development and language acquisition, factors that are crucial in the education of such individuals. A brief look at approaches and techniques that can be used in teaching and learning of students with developmental disabilities will assist some inclusive classroom teachers.

Justification for inclusion

The world can be described as a composition of inclusive communities with people who vary not only in terms of disability but also in other aspects such as race and gender (Mercer, 1997). Having developmental disabilities can only be a description of

some of the elements in the composition. Hence, if including individuals with disabilities in schools and classrooms with other members without disabilities is not justifiable then nothing is. All students, with and without disabilities, must learn together in the same classrooms. The teachers responsible just have to be equipped with the relevant skills and environment to enhance the teaching and learning atmosphere. A study on the 'challenges in teaching methods for students with disabilities in the inclusive classrooms' (Chidindi, 2007), revealed that in most inclusive classrooms, the responsible teachers were unprepared while the teaching and learning environment was generally not conducive. This article is therefore aimed at proposing suggestions of improving the teaching and learning environment as well as empowering the inclusive classroom teachers with effective teaching methods of the inclusive classrooms with students with developmental disabilities.

Care for every student

The teaching and learning needs of every learner, with or without disabilities, matter in an inclusive classroom. The experience, knowledge, skills and attitudes, capacities, possibilities as well as mentoring needs of each student have to be considered (Johnsen, 2001). For the students with developmental disabilities in the classroom, teachers have to look at each student as a unique individual with unique potentials, familiarities, abilities, points of view, and guidance needs. In inclusive classrooms, each student has to be treated as a unique individual. The student with developmental disabilities must be viewed from the perspective of inimitable individual who only happen to be part of the class. The learner has to contribute on how, when and what to learn although this perception can raise some heated debate. The interests of the learner need to be examined. Hence, the inclusive classroom teacher has to consider the uniqueness of the student and a special being. Unfortunately, in most schools in Zimbabwe, where teachers are usually faced with teacher pupil ratios of over forty students to a teacher in primary schools (Ministries of Higher Education, Sport and Culture and Higher and Tertiary Education, 2004), some of the propositions may be uphill tasks. The following can be worthwhile considerations for the inclusive classroom teachers.

The teaching and learning intentions

Intentions are generally referred to as aims, goals and objectives. Rosenthal (2006) argues that the teachers must have clear, written-out objectives for each learner.

Inclusive classroom teachers have to consider aspects such as the capabilities, previous knowledge, skills and interests of the students. To cater for the unique needs of the students with developmental disabilities, the Individual Education Plan (IEP) is an imperative tool. In the IEP long and short term goals set by the teacher. The intentions or the goals have to be adapted to suit the individual students. It must be noted that set goals have to set realistic targets for the learners. It is critical that the IEP is evaluated as it is implemented before a final evaluation is made. This is important to find out if any progress towards the achievement of set goals and objectives is being made. If no progress is made, the IEP has to be modified or even discarded altogether to come up with a realistic one (Bigge and Stump, 1999). When every student achieves the set objectives, they feel motivated to achieve more. Emphasis must be put on a clear idea of what they will be learning, and what the assignments are as some students usually have problems to articulate complex situations as one of their characteristics (Beirne-Smith, Ittenbach and Patton, 2002). Failure to do this may easily confuse them.

Use of the IEP requires the availability of support members such as the parents/guardians to help in the achievement of the set goals. They may know the student better than the teachers hence better placed to achieve the set goals. The availability of other professionals such as psychologists, physiotherapists and social workers is also crucial as these can offer other required support services. My study revealed that several teachers who participated in the study complained of failure to have other professionals who could support in the inclusion of students with developmental in schools in Harare.

Curriculum content

Inclusive education calls for a shift from the traditional way of teaching all children the same content to teaching every child as an individual (Johnsen, 2001). The curriculum of a student with a disability must be relevant to his/her needs (Brunswick, 1994). There must therefore be curriculum reforms that `aim at making learning appropriate to student's life, capacity and needs` (EENET, 2005:3). The content of what the learner with developmental disability has to learn in an inclusive classroom must be related to the goals, aims and objectives referred to as the intentions above. Aspects such as the level of mastery of the child, interests, needs, strengths,

weaknesses, learning barriers and fears have to be considered to provide relevant curriculum to individual student with disability.

The inclusive classroom teacher must be prepared to adapt the individual children's learning outcomes, equipment and teaching aids, and methods that he/she uses to assess the teaching/learning outcomes basing on the philosophy that difference is positively valued and celebrated (UNESCO, 2001; Oliver, 1995; Johnsen, 2003). Although this perception may be shot down in situations where the inclusive classroom teacher is faced with lack of resources coupled with a burden of a ballooned teacher student ratio, efforts must be made according to the individual student needs.

Students with disabilities need to be part of the education system through the pursuance of the national curriculum like everyone else. However, inclusive classroom teachers need be aware that all curriculum adaptations have to be in tandem with the national curriculum (Skjørten, 2001). The national curriculum of each level has to be taken into consideration to come up with the individual one. Even the curriculum content planned at the macro level must be considered with flexibility at the micro level. Teachers must realize that curriculum is meant for the learners and not the students for the curriculum. The inclusive classroom teacher must do more than just simply follow a fixed and prescribed curriculum as individual needs determine the curriculum needs of the individual student. The teachers therefore have to adapt curriculum content to suit individual children with disabilities in the inclusive classroom. The individual curriculum content must enable every child with disability to implement the acquired knowledge at community, hence enabling functionality in everyday life. Some curricula present some rigidity leaving no room for flexibility. The Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training, which was unfortunately never implemented in Zimbabwe schools, recommended a community based curriculum (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2000).

The content that is taught must be neither too difficult nor too easy. Inclusive classroom teachers need to select, adapt and sequence learning content to suit individual students (Dyson, 1997). This is vital so as each student must be treated as a unique individual. To assist inclusive classroom teachers cope with diversity of children in inclusive classrooms, the volume of work that inclusive classroom teachers have to teach to be reconsidered and arranged in smaller chunks

(Engelbrecht and Green, 2001). Small chunks make it easier for the students with developmental disabilities to understand concepts through the capability of lessening confusion. This brings up the need for teachers to task analyze their work, teaching from simpler to more challenging concepts. The teachers have to present material in an enthusiastic manner and instill hunger in their students to learn more on their own (Rosenthal, 2006).

Curriculum could be a major challenge to the educational systems where teachers are supposed to cover the syllabi in prescribed times irrespective of performance of the learners in the classroom. Naturally teachers then rush in their teaching to complete the syllabi. Some students with developmental disabilities may not cope under such learning environments. Also, strict timetables in following daily lessons would never benefit students with developmental disabilities as they may have little to benefit from the education in the inclusive classroom. Additionally an examination oriented type of curriculum where the effectiveness of a teacher is measured by the number of students who excel in exams is counterproductive to the students with developmental disabilities in the inclusive classroom. My study was carried out towards the end of a school term. It was therefore common for most of teacher participants to refuse second lesson observations as they wanted to revise for the upcoming examinations. Effectiveness of inclusive classroom teachers needs not to be measured through the number of students who excel in examinations as this may impact negatively on the students with developmental disabilities who may have problems in mastery of some skills during teaching and learning processes. Regular classroom teachers need not to teach for examinations but all learners regardless of their cognitive functioning if ever inclusion is adopted as the way to go. This may partly be the panacea of successful inclusive classroom practices.

It is unfortunate that in some education systems teachers become enslaved by timetables while failure to follow timetables bring forth some criminal teaching characteristics in the eyes of some school administrators. Undeniably, the teacher has to have a timetable but left with some flexibility to do that is best for every individual student in the classroom. Where flexibility is impermissible, the result is a hurried way of teaching at the detriment of the students with developmental disabilities in the inclusive classrooms. Rigidity in the education system needs to be discarded to allow necessary amendments. Timetables must be meant for the child

and not vice versa. In some instances during the course of my study, lessons were abruptly finished as the classroom teachers wanted to move over to the next lesson as the time table dictated without any consideration of the students' learning outcomes.

Communication

Teaching learners with developmental challenges in an inclusive regular classroom brings challenges in communication channels. Teachers need to have open communication channels with the students. The learners need to dialogue freely with teachers about their education in the inclusive classrooms. They need to share with the teachers their experiences and capabilities in the inclusive classrooms. While language delay is one of the characteristics of learners with disabilities, communication problems have to be minimized through using various communication channels. A language that is understood by the learner has to be used (Johnsen, 2001) with the mother tongue regarded as the best to use as the vernacular language connects students to new concepts as they find it easy to understand and manipulate other concepts (Datnow, Borman, Stringfield, Overman and Castelleno, 2003). In Zimbabwe where all subjects except the vernacular languages are taught in English, the teachers who participated in the study often resorted to the mother tongue, Shona, as best option to communicate with students. The resort to vernacular language assisted the students with disabilities to enhance their participation in and understanding of some lessons. .

Teaching students with developmental disabilities in inclusive classrooms requires teachers to express their genuine feelings about all children in the classrooms (McNamara and Moreton, 1995). Students with developmental disabilities need to be given the message that they are students first with developmental disabilities later. Teachers need to develop feelings of `ability to cope with diversity` (UNESCO, 2005:28). Positive attitudes may enable the inclusive classroom teachers become prepared mentally and emotionally to give every child adequate support (Steenkamp and Steenkamp, 1992). The inclusive classroom teachers must therefore be prepared to welcome learners with developmental disabilities as full members of the class (Farell and Ainscow, 2002) by conveying clear messages of accepting them to the inclusive classroom. Teachers need to develop positive perceptions and attitude of inclusion of students with developmental disabilities. Positive attitude and

perception of the inclusive classroom teachers may enable them thoroughly plan for all students in the inclusive classroom including those with developmental disabilities.

To many teachers who participated in my study, development of positive attitude towards students with developmental disabilities was an uphill battle, with the strong belief that the belief that that students with developmental disabilities could not learn like everyone else. Awareness programmes about how students with developmental disabilities learn may help some teachers change their attitudes. For instance teachers need to be aware that what other students may learn in a short space of time, those with developmental disabilities may take more time to achieve the same goal. Viewing such students from a positive perspective may ultimately send the correct attitudinal message.

For inclusion of children with developmental disabilities to be a reality, communication with parents as active partners should be regarded as crucial to achieve successful inclusion of students with developmental disabilities (UNESCO, 1994). Parents have to be involved actively in inclusion (Rye, 2002; Gulliford and Upton, 1992). They have to be involved in activities such as programme planning and evaluation. Parents may provide important information such as the interests; knowledge and skills of the students that may assist the inclusive classroom teachers decide what and how to teach the students. Parents can be major obstacles to inclusion if they are left out as equal partners for successful inclusive practices. They can therefore ensure the success or failure of the inclusive ideas. Some parents may wonder if their children will progress and gain skills if their children are moved into the inclusive classrooms (Knight, 1999). Some parents may feel that inclusion may lead to a compromise of the education of their children opting for separate classrooms. Instead, some parents may fail to realize that after graduating from school, their children will never have the choice of a disabled society to live in. Parents need to be communicated with for inclusion to succeed as the same parents can contribute financially and materially to the success of inclusion. It will be naïve for proponents of inclusion to foresee its success without taking parents and/guardians on board, as they are important stakeholders who are capable of influencing the success of or stifle the inclusive ideas.

Teaching methods

Where the inclusive classroom teachers lack the necessary teaching methods, there may be challenges in the inclusion practices. As a way of celebrating individual differences, individual learning methods need to be considered as `no method...is so complete that it fits all pupils` (Johnsen, 2001:278). Teachers need to be aware that learners are unique individuals who learn in unique ways through unique methods. The learning strategies and media of instruction have to be considered at individual level. If students are different individuals then they need different learning techniques (Taba, 1962 in Johnsen, 2001). Therefore inclusive classroom teachers need to be flexible to cater for the diversity of students through appropriate teaching programmes, organization and other adaptations that are necessary for individual students (Knight, 1999). They need to work with all students at their instructional levels (Vygotsky, 1978). Students with developmental disabilities need to be taught and not as a class while lessons have to be presented in clear and structured ways.

Many teachers may face hurdles to focus on individual needs in their teaching methods if the teacher pupil ratio in the regular classroom is too large. Focusing on relevant teaching methods for specific students with developmental disabilities may become a problem. Individualized teaching may be a problem in countries where regular classroom teachers have to cope with large class sizes due to prevailing poor economies and other reasons that subsequently make hiring additional teachers a challenge. In such situations solutions must be found to reduce teacher pupil ratios through mitigating the constraints to pay extra teachers or employ class assistants.

Regular classroom teachers need training to equip them with a more diverse student population (Smith, 1998). With enough training and preparation, teachers may be geared to `teach each and everyone in accordance with their needs as individuals and as members of the class` (Johnsen, 2003:4). Regular classroom teachers need to be aware of appropriate teaching methods for the specific individual student and how to use those methods effectively. Teachers need to adapt materials to the individual student's teaching and learning needs.

Regular staff development programmes may be a panacea to equip the teachers with necessary teaching methods. In-service training workshops could develop the teachers' competencies of teaching students with developmental disabilities in the inclusive classrooms (Olivier and Williams, 2005). It is important that such staff

development approaches must always be preceded by needs assessment of the teachers. For instance the teachers may need to develop knowledge and confidence in developing meaningful IEPs and evaluating the effectiveness of education (Giangreco, 1997), training programme may have to focus on that. The inclusive classroom teachers would then become aware that it is them and the school that have to adjust to all children who wish to enroll rather expecting individual children to adjust (Zollers and Ramathan, 1999; Stubbs, 2002).

Confidence in being responsible for inclusive classes may lead to an understanding of students as individuals, where strengths and competencies are built upon. In support of the teachers' effort, there would be need for a paradigm shift on how the effectiveness of inclusive classroom teachers, if not all teachers for that matter, is evaluated. Instead of judging teachers' effectiveness through the number of children who excel in public examinations, there would be need to discard the notion of teaching children for examinations. Inclusive classroom teachers can be evaluated through discussion of particular children's accounts and other means deemed necessary.

Clark, Dyson and Millward (1995:155) advise regular classroom teachers to reduce 'level of abstraction of information so as to make content relevant to the student's current and future life'. Vaughn, Bos and Schum (2000) recommend hands-on-instruction. Stimulating conditions, role-playing, humour and field trips can be effective to teach learners with developmental disabilities (Armstrong, 1998). Such approaches can develop the zeal to learn in students with developmental disabilities. Importantly, learners need to be taught from what they already know and also use real life activities as teaching tools to reduce confusion. Use of instructional materials is recommended. The teacher may enhance the students' understanding by using concrete learning and teaching aids. Teachers can use devices such as audiotapes, video recordings and computers incorporated in their teaching as these enhance understanding. This may effectively cater for the diversity of students in the inclusive classroom. The teachers can also use the available local resources in their teaching of the inclusive classrooms as a reflection of resourcefulness to achieve the desired results (Steenkamp and Steenkamp, 1992). This should, nevertheless, be misconstrued to mean that the schools and governments have to abdicate their role of providing teaching and learning resources to enhance successful inclusion in

schools. The inclusive classroom teachers also have to arrive early for work preparation and going an extra mile by teaching after the official school hours (Olivier and William (2005) as this may go a long way in handling diversity as inclusion involves extra work and responsibility (Pijl, Meijer and Hegarty, 1997).

Conclusion

Shrewd teachers have to contemplate of other methods of ensuring successful inclusive practices in addition to the aforementioned and discussed ones to achieve successful inclusion of students with developmental disabilities. Admittedly, inclusion can only succeed by putting in place enabling mechanisms, availing an appropriate environment and ensuring the development of relevant teaching techniques in the inclusive classroom teachers. Inclusion of students with developmental disabilities calls for inclusive classroom teachers with enthusiasm and supportive approach to successful inclusion. They are the most important determinants of the success of the notion of inclusivity as long as they are capacitated through the development of effective teaching methods.

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