INCLUSION OF EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN: THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN EQUALISING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

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Abstract

The role of regular education programme is to help both the exceptional and non-exceptional child to achieve optimum physical, mental, and social growth which is said to be achievable in normal school set-up with the help of teachers. Exceptional children are those who are physically gifted, highly creative or mentally gifted or physically and mentally retarded. They are children with special needs and abilities which are currently advocated to be included or integrated into regular classes and normal environment with the expectation that the teachers will play their roles in helping to inculcate in them what is needed as a member of the society. The paper x-rays the societal view and attitude towards exceptional children, inclusion and exceptional children’s education, the importance of inclusion to the exceptional children and the role of teachers in regular classes in helping exceptional children. The paper recommends inclusion as a means to enhance the total development of exceptional children who in turn are expected to be useful to them and to the society in general.

Introduction

Growing child adapts to his/her environment on the basis of the experiences perceived through sense modalities while each of the five sensory receptors responsible for the functions of hearing, sight, touch, taste and smell play an important role in the manner in which the developing child perceives a given experience. Factors such as heredity, environment, disease and accident have contributed to various disability or handicaps. The factors cannot be eliminated from the society, which implies that there are bound to be children falling into the unusual group who will be unable to cope with the demands of the regular programmes. To exclude children with various disabilities from the regular education programmes means denying them the benefit that the total education programme offers.

A major problem often encountered by the exceptional child in the regular education programme is that of ready acceptance into group relationships. There is the need for provision of social peer group through well-structured regular school programmes. Ytsvin (1995) in criticizing the popular assumptions and misconceptions about regular teachers capabilities in handling children with special needs, maintained that children learn best in regular classroom, featuring flexible organizational and instructional patterns as well as material supports for those with special needs.

The functional drives of success, recognition and approval are desired by all categories of children regardless of their physical appearance or disability. Since they share the same fitness needs and interest with the normal population, it is therefore imperative that professionals in education ensure that these needs are met and their interest is accommodated within the designed curriculum (Ogundare, 1999).

Adegbite (2005) insisted that it is worthwhile to note that because of the derogatory connotation attached to labels such as “handicapped” and “retarded” in the field of special education, “exceptionality” rather than “handicapped”, “learning difficulties” rather than “retardation” or sub-normality are terminologies being used (Sykes, 1981). Sykes (1981) stressed further that in special education, emphasis is now placed on a descriptive analysis of each child’s strength and weakness rather than diagnosis, labeling or categorization.


Inclusion and Children Education

The aim of education is to reform the society and the improvement of the society can be effected through the proper development of the individual that composed the society whether normal or exceptional. The exceptional child is one who deviates from the average or normal child in mental characteristics, in sensory abilities, in neuromuscular or physical characteristics, multiple handicaps or giftedness to the extent that he requires modification of school practices or special education services in order to develop the maximum capacity (Adeshina, 2001 & Oniye, 2005).

There is no doubt that many children are exceptional, though there is no current statistics about them. Despite the lack of statistics, it is evident that there is an urgent necessity to focus more on meeting their needs for various reasons. Oniye (2005) observed that mainstreaming/ inclusion and integration often used synonymously is the fusing or absorbing of the exceptional child or children into regular classes and normal environment. The National Policy on Education FRN (2004) in Nigeria, Section 8, paragraph 56, number 5 views integration of the exceptional children as the most realistic form of special education since they are eventually expected to live in the society. Equalizing educational opportunities for all, the policy promised the establishment of well-staffed and equipped special classes and units for the inclusion of the exceptional learners.

The Education for All

Handicapped Children Act of 1975 mandated individualized instructional programs for students with disabilities. It also called for placing such students, whenever possible, in regular classrooms rather than separating them from inclusive students. Many educators advocate placing exceptional students in regular classrooms with students of diverse ability levels, an educational method known as inclusion (Wikipedia, 2005).

It is expected of the schools to provide children with skills, values, and behaviours that will help them become responsible citizens, contribute to social stability in the country, and increase economic productivity of their country. The federal government also requires schools to correct social inequality among students of different racial, ethnic, social, or economic backgrounds.

Inclusion in education is seen as the practice of teaching exceptional children in regular classroom with non-exceptional children to the fullest extent possible. Such children may have orthopaedic, intellectual, emotional or visual difficulty or handicaps associated with hearing or learning. Inclusion is a term which expresses commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. It involves bringing the support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services) and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students). Proponents of inclusion generally favour newer forms of education service delivery.

Inclusion

Mainstreaming have been of increasing interest since the late 1960 in response to a number of factors. Research has shown that many handicapped students learned better in regular than in special classes. The Federal Education for Handicapped children act of 1975 which state that all handicapped children are entitled to free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment has been widely interpreted as supporting the expansion of inclusion.

Mainstreaming/inclusion has worked well with those segments of the special student population whose disabilities compatible with the classroom setting and is felt in general to better prepare special students socially for life after school. It has also helped other school children gain a greater understanding of those with disabilities. It is commonly believed that educating children with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers facilitate access to the general curriculum for children with disabilities. Studies show that most disabled children do make better academic progress.
when expectations of their performance are raised. In addition, it is believed that educating both disabled and non-disabled children together fosters understanding and tolerance that better prepares students of all abilities to function in the world beyond school.

In America, studies show that special education students who are included have higher academic achievement, higher self-esteem, a greater probability of attending college and better physical health than special needs students in self-contained special classrooms. They are more likely to graduate and find employment. In fact, graduation rates of disabled students increased by 14% from 1984 to 1997 (National Research Centre on Learning Disabilities, 2005) in Stainback (2008). Inclusion promotes diversity and acceptance. It also allows opportunity for all students to advance. For the learning disabled students, they are motivated through competition to improve.

Some worry that children with special needs cannot be given adequate attention in an integrated/inclusive class. However, considerable evidence suggests that regular classroom teachers do not receive the training and support to appropriately modify the curriculum to meet the needs of gifted students. Many educators also claim that minorities and economically disadvantaged children are under-represented in educational programs for gifted students. At the same time, limited funding for education in general restricts efforts to nurture the talents of all gifted children.

Type of Inclusion Approaches

Oniye (2005) identified three types of inclusion approaches as;

- **Location Integration:** This is arrangement in which special units are allowed to grow in regular school but with different instructors.
- **Social Integration:** The handicapped share the same experience in non-academic task/activities like eating together, sporting together, and sharing the same assembly.
- **Functional Integration:** They share the same compound, classroom, library and learn together under the same instruction.

The Society and the Exceptional Children

The attitude of those around the exceptional person has far reaching implications on how they adjust to the disabled or handicapping condition. It is observed that the general attitude of people towards the disabled is governed by stigmatization. Most individuals, communities and even government, especially in Africa put the odds against the disabled. They are looked upon as economic and social liabilities. When a child has a congenital abnormality that is disabling, it is not uncommon for parents to show signs of rejection of the child. Turkur (2002) observed that for a very long time, the disabled have been treated with contempt simply because of their disabilities. It is also because of the society’s negative reactions that some parents have been known to abandon their disabled children and even go to the extreme of killing them (Adegbite, 2005).

The disabled require the satisfaction of certain needs for their development. These needs which are social, biological and psychological are essential for their survival. In the society, everyone should be able to develop into a responsible individual. This includes the opportunity to have the freedom of choice regarding education and training. In this respect, many children with disabilities are not given full opportunity to enjoy the programme. They are often pushed off into special needs schools when many of them could have been better placed in normal schools. In some European countries, exceptional children are able to attend the same schools with the able or normal children (Salami, 2007).

The Integration of the exceptional children into the society can best be improved by ensuring the existence of more possibilities for interaction between the differently able and the able bodies. The legislation in European countries on job opportunities pitches the individuals with disabilities in the same contest with the able-bodied individuals. This makes it possible for the disabled to seek for jobs relevant to their ability and capability.
apart from their educational or vocational training.

**Inclusion and Its Benefits**

Inclusion in the context of education is a term that refers to the practice of educating students with special needs in regular classes during specific time periods based on their skills. This means regular education classes are combined with special education classes. Schools that practice inclusion believe that special needs students who cannot function in a regular classroom to a certain extent "belong" to the special education environment. It is believed that educating children with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers facilitates access to the general curriculum for children with disabilities. Studies according to Wikipedia (2005) show that students with disabilities who are inclusive enjoy the following benefits as discussed below:

Higher academic achievement: Mainstreaming/inclusion have shown to be more academically effective than exclusion practices. For instance, The National Research Centre on Learning Disabilities found that graduation rates of all students with disabilities in the U.S. increased by 14% from 1984 to 1997, although this report does not differentiate between students enrolled in mainstreaming, inclusive, or segregated programs. Access to a resource room for direct instruction has shown to be effective in increasing students’ academic skills and thus increasing the abilities applied by students in a general education setting. Compared to full-time placement in a special education class or special school both part-time and full-time placement in theregular classroom have been shown to improve academic achievement in students with mild academic disabilities, as well as to improve their long-term behaviour.

Higher self-esteem: By being included in a regular-paced education setting, students with disabilities have shown to be more confident and display qualities of raised self-efficacy. For instance, all students in California who went to a different school prior to attending a mainstreaming program were asked to fill out an assessment of their old school as compared to the inclusion program. The assessments showed that out of all students with disabilities 96% felt they were more confident, 3% thought they had the same experiences as an excluded student, and 1% felt they had less self-esteem. Overall, students felt that they were equal to their peers and felt that they should not be treated any differently.

Better social skills: Any kind of inclusion practice, including mainstreaming, allows students with disabilities to learn social skills through observation, gain a better understanding of the world around them, and become a part of the “regular” community. Mainstreaming is particularly beneficial for children with autism. By interacting with same-aged “normal” children, children with autism were observed to be six times more likely to engage in social relations outside of the classroom. Because children with autism spectrum disorders have severely restricted interests and abnormalities in communication and social interaction, the increased interaction with typical children may be beneficial to them. The same study in Wikipedia (2005) showed that students with Down’s syndrome were three times more likely to communicate with other people.

Inclusion also benefits other children. It opens the lines of communication between those students with disabilities and their peers. If they are included into classroom activities, all students become more sensitive to the fact that these students may need extra assistance.

Benefits to non-disabled students: Many people believe that educating non-disabled students and students with disabilities together creates an atmosphere of understanding and tolerance that better prepares students of all abilities to function in the world beyond school. Students without disabilities who engaged in an inclusive physical education program reported increases in self-concept, tolerance, self-worth, and a better understanding of other people. The students also reported that the inclusion program was important because it prepared them to deal with disability in their own lives.
Basic Services Requirement for Exceptional Children in Schools

Ajobiewe (2000) recommended that in an environment where inclusion/mainstreaming of exceptional children will be practiced, social and academic services must be rendered. This is to ensure that the integrating child gets satisfaction with his peers, family, neighbours and friends. The child should be able to understand the need to respect others in his/her environment and expect others to respect him too. The services include the following according to Ajobiewe (2000) and Oniye (2005):

- Counseling: Services: to acknowledge their limitation and strength so as to be able to differentiate between what they can do and what they cannot do.
- Parental Counseling: Counseling parents on the need to accept their handicapped children like other normal child.
- Public Enlightenment Programme: to facilitate successful integration of the exceptional children into normal society. Provision of rehabilitation counseling and vocational rehabilitation for exceptional children in our school.
- Provision of appropriate learning arrangement: Every qualified child with disability has the right to pursue the field of study for which he is capable e.g individualized instruction, self-activity, additional stimulation for teaching the disabled children.
- Opportunity for full participation: all system of the society should be open and accessible to the disabled members e.g the physical environment, housing, transportation, social and health.
- Affection and recognition of the disabled: facilitation affective relationship between the disabled and their parents, professionals and the society at large.
- Rehabilitation services: to facilitate successful integration of the exceptional children into the normal society (Adima, 1987).

Attitudes of Teachers in Inclusion/Mainstreaming Programmes in Schools

To provide equal access to education, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act requires the placement of handicapped students in the least restrictive environment that will promote their academic and social development. In response to this requirement, schools are mainstreaming/including handicapped students from segregated special education settings into regular classrooms.

Every child needs and deserves dedicated, outstanding teachers, who know their subject matter; are effectively trained; and know how to teach to high standards and to make learning come alive for students. Because teachers play a crucial role in inclusion/mainstreaming programmes, there is need to genuinely recognize the function of teachers in national development as crucial. In fact second to none.

Teacher attitudes can be the focus of inclusion/mainstreaming evaluations or part of a larger program assessment. Studies also can look at how types of teacher attitudes reflect different stages in the implementation process and at the process of implementing inclusion/mainstreaming programmes. Many different questions can be asked about teacher attitudes toward inclusion/mainstreaming. Many studies have examined the cognitive and affective changes in teachers' to evaluate in-service treatment effects. Others have looked at specific programme effects, such as class size, class composition, or support services. The relationship of teacher attitudes to such teacher characteristics as sex, knowledge of handicaps or mainstreaming, and grade level taught has also been studied.

Identifying teacher attitudes is important on two levels in inclusion/mainstreaming: the individual classroom level and the larger program level. On the classroom level, teacher attitudes affect teaching and students. Research shows that teachers' attitudes influence both their expectations for their students and their behaviour toward them. These attitudes, expectations, and behaviours influence both student self-image and academic performance (Alexander and Strain 1978).
Negativeteacher attitudes toward handicapped students are detrimental to the handicapped students mainstreamed/included into their classrooms (Hannah and Pliner 1983). On the program level, teacher attitudes provide important feedback for judging overall program effectiveness and for improving inclusion/mainstreaming procedures. Most studies show that teachers, like the general public, have negative views of both handicapped students and inclusion/mainstreaming. Teachers are most negative to inclusion/mainstreaming emotionally disturbed and mentally retarded students (Alexander and Strain 1978; Hannah and Pliner 1983). Lack of knowledge about disabilities, experience with handicapped students, and training in teaching these types of students appear as major contributors of these attitudes.

Ganschow, Weber, & Davis, (1984) in Christopher & Durand (1992) have argued that the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142) would necessarily have resulted in modified state requirements for training regular classroom teachers. The authors concluded that regular classroom teachers are inadequately prepared to educate inclusive/mainstreamed children with disabilities. Recent studies indicate that these trends have not changed and that the need to educate regular education teachers in areas of special education remains imperative.

Christopher & Durand (1992) argued that the "interface between general and special education is one of the most important and pressing issues facing educators in the 1990s". The authors recommended that strategies designed to improve collaboration between regular and special educators should be implemented at several levels, including those within the education system itself. Despite the need for such practices, however, few attempts have been made to provide interdisciplinary training at the pre-service or higher educational levels.

Pre-service and in-service training has been effective in promoting positive attitudes and facilitating skill acquisition (Salend, 1984). Additionally, training should address the stages of concern of the teachers involved, their degree of actual experience with mainstreaming, to be most effective (Holloway, 1980).

Support services for teachers with inclusive/mainstreamed classes appear vital to teacher attitudes. Having psychologists or special education teachers who can provide information and assistance on a specific handicapped child, behavior management, or teaching techniques, makes teachers more positive toward inclusion/mainstreaming (Hannah and Pliner 1983; Horne 1980). Placing handicapped students in regular classrooms makes more demands on the time and talents of the classroom teacher. Assessing teacher attitudes is vital to providing teachers with the training and support services to enable them to meet the challenge successfully.

Conclusion

Proponents of both mainstreaming and inclusion assert that educating children with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers fosters understanding and tolerance, better preparing students of all abilities to function in the world beyond school. The crucial roles of teachers as the pillars of the society, who help student irrespective of his/her situation (exceptional or normal) to grow to shoulder the responsibility of take care of themselves, their family and the their nation cannot be neglected especially in inclusion/mainstreaming programme.
Recommendations

It is therefore recommended that:
1. Inclusion/mainstreaming should be adopted as a means of helping the exceptional children to be fully adjusted to society which the society considered ethically and morally sound.

2. The teachers who are shouldered with the responsibilities of helping them acquiring all round development should be prepared through training.

3. Regular teachers should be educated in areas of special education for effectiveness in an inclusive education programmes.

4. Support services with adequate funding must be provided in an inclusion programme.

References


