

THE CHILD WITH DISABILITY AND THE CLASSROOM: A LIVE EXPERIENCE FROM NORWAY IN AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL CLASS

BY

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Abstract

This paper deals with a child with disability in an inclusive classroom and how a conducive teaching and learning environment can pep up this child and the peers with no disability to exhibit both excellent academic and acceptable social behaviours. A live experience from an inclusive school in Norway provided a classical teaching and learning model in an inclusive classroom which can be adapted. In line with this, it is recommended that with relevant teaching and learning materials/equipment, effective networking with resource teachers and supportive classmates, parents and community participation, a carry over effect of the classroom situation to the home with appropriate orientation can replicate skills and enable transfer of learning to be made with ease.

Introduction

According to the United Nations definition, the child is the one under 18 years of age. The child with a disability or disabilities implies that she/he is having multiple dysfunction abilities or impairment as a result of damage to two or more or either sensory or physical organs. These may be hearing, visual or cognitive impairment. The physical problems may affect the limbs or any of the limbs of the physical body whose functional loss can be complete or incomplete. Again, the loss of function either sensory or physical can be psychological, emotional, social or psychosocial with no damage to the organs of the human body.

A child may have multiple handicapping condition or have only one type of malfunction of either a sensory impairment. Depending on the level of severity, a child may be enrolled to benefit from the inclusive educational programme. Challenges to make the inclusive schooling a success and to enable education for all a reality is so important that this paper presents three basic facts on issues reflected in the topic. These information are centred on:

- o Who this child with disability is;
- o Practical examples of the classroom situation of children in an integrated or inclusive educational programme in Ghana.
- o The classical experience in an inclusive educational classroom in Norway.

- o Recommendations/suggestions for the way forward in the Ghanaian setting of an inclusive educational programme.

What is an Inclusive Educational Programme/Schooling?

Inclusive education is, defined as a learning environment or strategy that includes all children in the learning process. The fundamental principle of inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of learners accommodating both different styles and rates of learning. Inclusive schooling ensures quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnership with the communities (Salamanca, conference, 1994) within the context of inclusive school, children with special educational needs can achieve the fullest educational progress and social integration. Manivannan (1999) states that inclusive education is the implementation of policy and process that allows all children to participate in all programmes. Children belong together. It is child centred with individual attention and equal opportunity and full participation in a favourable setting. Success, therefore, requires a concerted effort, not of the teachers, school and staff, but also from peers, parents, families and volunteers.

Inclusive education therefore, promotes the full personal academic and professional development of all learners irrespective of their differences (save the children, UK, 1998). Bender (2002), complemented these statements on resource training by stating that for a successful implementation of inclusive education teachers are trained to implement government's guidelines and implemented study programmes to all children.

If a preview of running an inclusive school is given ideally in this pattern how is Ghana running it? What is the situation like in the inclusive school environment in Ghana?

What are the realities of the classroom situation for children in mainstreams or inclusive schools?

In terms of infrastructure/architectural designs, observations indicate that school buildings remain inaccessible. Main public buildings have no rails and ramps. The immediate example is the University of Education, Winneba which is yet to have ramps. The old basic schools have none; policies on construction of new buildings may be implemented in the future. Braille text books for the blind, microscope for enlargement of prints for reading and learning situations are not available for students and pupils with low vision.

Many classroom teachers have either inadequate or lack competent skills to interact with the communication impaired and the blind, who are in

the inclusive schools. Government is yet to advance funds for in-service training. In the past, a proposal written by the Department of Special Education through the Consultancy Section of UEW to train teachers in the field had no favourable response as a result of lack of funds.

Parents, peers, teachers and community members are not sensitized to inclusive schools therefore cannot help in any of the schools for inclusive. Besides, some school authorities face anger from parents and even threats from them with the view of withdrawing their wards from the schools (Gadagbui, 2005, unpublished).

Stigma, cultural prohibitions or superstitions are some of the setbacks to inclusive schooling in Ghana.

Unit schools really are not practising principles for inclusive education but just integration. This type of integration sees child as the problem. This is because the school environments are largely unchanged; equal opportunities are not given in terms of facilities and participation; child is not the focus but the school is subject centred. Large classes prevent individual attention. As at now, only few selected schools in the communities are the only ones "imposed" on children with special needs education. Kibi, Koforidua, Swedru, Avakpedome in the Volta Region and few other parts in Ghana are known for integration. Gadagbui (2003). Conducted research on over 300 children in Ghana and findings indicated that, some parents cannot afford a school bag, pencil or exercise book for their children to attend school with. However, government's initiative for capitation will alleviate this particular problem for the poor or irresponsible parents. Feeding, to some children was a problem. A proportion had to fend for themselves. The same trends is seen among some special needs children in basic special schools as well who are subjected to labour at the expense of their studies and health.

Until parents and concerned citizens adapt the Salamanca Conference (1994), fundamental principles of inclusive schooling (e.g. concerted effort of teachers, parents, school and staff, families and volunteers task) to aim at success, the concept of inclusive schooling will be a mere rhetoric without proper implementation of policies.

The Classical Experience in an Inclusive Educational Classroom in Norway

In 2003, June, the writer of this paper found herself on an exchange programme in Norway, to a special high school. On arrival, the students were on break. Every child was in a preferred play ground. There was this dark coloured girl of Asia origin with the play mates. Until we were told, we did not know she was disabled. This blind girl we would call "subject A". In the classroom, she had her own computer with fresher in a class not less or more than 20. Two teachers ought to have been in the class that day but there was only one teacher who catered for all the

children. Information and instruction given were comprehended by all. Why?

Just as every one had a text book on every subject, "Subject A" also had brailled class text books on a different shelf close by. It was an English comprehension class. She was excellent at the computer, got access to the location of books and made use of the related one for the session. She was not guided to locate the book or depended on any one. She had peer support to interact with at the play ground but in class, "Subject A" worked independently like any other child and responded correctly to instructions. After class, when the rest left for home, the resource teacher had a course on orientation and mobility with her so that she could learn to go home along just as the others. "Subject A" had support since the primary school and that would continue to the tertiary level. In her home, we were told that she had the same learning facilities, the computer with the fresher, and the textbooks as well. She is supported by the family and she is brilliant.

Recommendations/Suggestions

A successful inclusive education and effective school for all demands that, certain basic principles for teaching ought to be the focus of every teacher, educationist or policy maker and implementer.

Three features as indices for such success to have effective education for all have been identified by UNESCO Teacher Education Resources Pack are stated as:

1. Teachers have to know their pupils well in terms of their existing skills and knowledge, their interests, and their previous experience.
2. Pupils have to be helped to establish a sense of personal meaning about the tasks and activities in which they are engaged.
3. Classrooms have to be organized in ways that encourage involvement and effort.

Besides, research shows that successful teaching comes as a result of the following:

1. purpose
2. variety and choice
3. reflection and review
4. flexible use of resources
5. co-operation (UNESCO, Teacher Education Resources Pack, Module 3, pp 77-89).

Purpose

This is the objective/focus of the task given to children. Some children are not getting on with their work just because they lack they understanding as to the purpose of what they have been asked to do.

But the question is how do teachers get their children to have this understanding? Teachers have different ways/styles of personal preference in teaching;

1. direct approach – which has to do with explanation and demonstration
2. a less directive style
 - discussion
 - negotiation with their pupils
3. a blend of all these styles together with individuals and small groups, observations and moving around the pupils at work and
4. intervening where necessary support the learning.

Variety and Choice

a. Allow Variety

Teachers must introduce variety in what is done and how it is done. Children have the choice in using diverse classroom materials to get the correct answer and responses. For example, cowries, sea shells, pebbles, bottle tops, coloured wooden blocks for counting are entertained.

Choose different but related topics/tasks to match with the title for discussion. The variety and choice of materials or tasks, offer a wide range of different learning experiences and caters for individual differences.

Again, teachers must encourage reflection of children's choice and make them to think and give reasons after brainstorming on why that choice and what has been done.

b. Permitting Children's "Guided Choice"

Teachers have to allow children to choose to some extent what they can do, how and when.

Advantages

1. This encourages understanding and gives them the opportunity to relate classroom activities to their own experiences and existing knowledge.
2. Teachers as a result, are able to set appropriate tasks related to the children's own choice.
3. Choice makes children to take more responsibilities for their own learning.

Reflection and Review

Children are given the chance to reflect on what they have done and train to have the skill to **self review** after teachers comments on the way they attempted to carry out their tasks.

Flexible use of Resources

If the teacher organized the learning materials well and having good storage facilities and easy access to them, their time will not be wasted but will work towards effective teaching in classroom. Where parents and teacher assistants are, instead of only one teacher, pupils can be given additional support as team teaching is encouraged with more interaction. If there is time and material management to ensure maximum opportunity for interaction, effective learning will take place.

Co-operation

Team work and sharing among children and teacher(s) are the principal issues here. Cooperative learning has to be implanted in children when planned and systematically worked out with children.

Other Suggestions

Teacher education must train trainees to have the capabilities of working in an inclusive way.

Barely two years ago, the initial teacher training colleges have introduced a two credit hour course in introduction to Special Education for one term. This is one way of ensuring teacher competency for catering for children with special needs.

However, ideally, teachers for such courses need some extra information on inclusive schooling in order to share with their students. This suggestion can take the form of;

- o Workshop/seminars to be conducted for all teachers in the field for inclusive schooling are a sure way to move towards inclusive for capable delivery.
- o Screening/assessment of all children must be a policy to prevent secondary disabilities.

Conclusion

If Ghana can have the facilities, equipment and related learning materials, teacher competencies, willingness to support from every community member including parents and families, the nation can produce many "Subject As" as observed in a Junior High School in Norway, June 2003.

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