

COLLABORATION BETWEEN GENERAL AND SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION TEACHERS: A REFORM AGENDUM

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Abstract

This paper examined collaboration between general education and special needs education teachers in relation to the reform agenda in the education sub-sector geared towards meeting the educational needs of special needs children in Nigeria. In doing this, salient issues such as concept of collaborative teaching; models of effective teaching; planning for effective collaboration as a reform agendum; teacher education and professional development; roles of general and special needs education teachers in collaborative teaching and the importance of collaborative teaching were highlighted

Introduction

Nigerian educational sub-sector has become an experimental parlance of political maneuverings. The maneuvering has seen “educational-political gladiators” introducing reform programmes probably with good intentions that only lived as long as their actors remained relevant within the corridor of power. Therefore, the educational sector became experimental ground of individual perceived programmes meant to advance “her” course.

The recent much lorded educational reforms anchored by the then Minister of Education will definitely go the way of others if conscious efforts are not geared towards aggressively pursuing their implementation to the letter. Hence, a need to undertake with all zeal and zest the collaboration of both the general education and special needs education teachers within the framework of inclusive education as a cardinal reform agendum.

Historically, teachers have carried out their duties in isolation — one teacher to a classroom. As the concept of inclusion gets implemented in Nigeria, special needs children have transited into the regular classroom, hence the use of the term “mainstreaming”. Ripley (2005) opined that the philosophy now includes all students in the same class, which has brought about teams of general

and special needs education teachers working collaboratively or cooperatively to combine their professional knowledge, perspectives and skills.

It is a conscious effort at creating one educational system that values all students. However, there have been fierce criticisms (Kauffman, 1993; Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994; Shanker, 1994), with failure to acknowledge that proponents of inclusive education emphasize the necessity of providing supplementary aids and support services “in order” to make the general educational setting appropriate for students with disabilities (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996).

Therefore, like Ripley pointed out that “the biggest challenge for educators is in deciding to share the role that has traditionally been individual - to share the goals, decisions, classroom instruction, responsibility for students, assessment of students’ learning, problem solving, and classroom management. The implication of this is that the teachers must begin to think of it as “our” class as against the traditional “my” class.

The Concept of Collaborative Teaching

Collaborative teaching entails an educational approach in which general and special educators work in co-active and coordinated fashion to jointly teach heterogeneous groups of students in educationally integrated settings. In this teaching approach both general and special educators are simultaneously present in the general classroom, maintaining joint responsibilities for specified education instruction that is to occur within that setting (Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989: 36). It could be seen as an arrangement in which two or more teachers or other school staff collaboratively assume the responsibilities for the same group of students on a regular basis. In this arrangement, they (the teachers) plan, teach, develop instructional materials, monitor and evaluate students and communicate students’ progress (Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin, & Williams; 2000); within the same classroom situation most of the days as equal partners in interactive relationships. The functionality of this approach as a distinct effort against earlier ones hinges on joint planning and an in-depth knowledge of both teachers in curricula matters for flexibility and adaptation where necessary.

In developing and implementing collaborative teaching, school professionals experience great challenges in the way they go about their daily work. To overcome the inevitable fears and stresses associated with change, the educators involved must feel that they are responsible for the change and that its success or failure directly depends on them (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1995).

Models of Collaborative Teaching

There are myriad of collaboration models that proponents of collaborative teaching have confirmed effective in teaching the special needs children. These include:

1. Collaboration-Consultation: This is a support model where special education professionals work with general education in a consulting role. Cramer

(1998) describes collaboration consultation as a model that emphasized a close working relationship between general and special education teachers. Effective collaboration consists of designing and using a sequence of goal-oriented activities that result in improved working relationship between professional colleagues. The responsibility for collaborating can either be the sole responsibility of one individual who seeks to improve a professional relationship or a joint commitment of two or more people who wish to improve their working relationship. In this model, general education teacher requests the services of the special educator (i.e. consultant) to help generate ideas for addressing an on-going situation. This is indeed an interactive approach.

2. **Teacher Assistance Teams:** This is a support model comprising of teachers and instructional support personnel where solutions are developed for specific problems of students demonstrating difficulties. The teams provide support to general education teachers. It is made up of core members plus the teacher seeking assistance from his professional colleagues. This model emphasizes on analyzing the problem situations and developing potential solutions.
3. **Co-teaching:** This is a model where general and special education teachers work together in providing direct service to students. It employs joint planning and teaching as well as shared responsibilities of instruction. The problem in implementing co-teaching as a model of instruction is the compatibility of individual teachers and personnel working together. It therefore, requires individuals to willingly give up some control and accept constructive criticism from colleagues. According to Cramer (1998), co-teaching has some variations which include interactive teaching; station teaching; parallel teaching; and alternative teaching.

Planning for Effective Collaboration as a Reform Agendum

If inclusion is the goal, collaboration between the general education teachers and special needs education teachers is inevitable. Therefore, as part of the on-going reforms in the education sub-sector in Nigeria, the issue of collaboration must be saddled with a sense of responsibility and national significance.

In planning for collaboration, time becomes the hub of the wheel on which the whole package gravitates. Time for planning, time for development and time for evaluating. This calls for unfathomable commitment on the part of the collaborating teachers at the level of their dispense of time, support, resources, monitoring and more importantly, persistence. The three (3) levels of planning are hereby recommended. At the federal, state and local levels resources needed to be made available include money, professional assistance, etc. New initiatives are guaranteed sustainability. Head teachers and principals play potent leadership roles in facilitating collaborative efforts by instructional personnel.

Planning at the classroom level is where the actual implementation of

instructional packages and designs takes place and requires enormous time to planning judiciously for an effective and efficient collaboration between the general and special needs education teachers. Proponents of collaboration contend that such ardent planning should provide staff development opportunities to encourage teachers and administrators to participate in classes, workshops, seminars and/or professional conferences on cooperative teaching. They have also underscored the need for motivation as an ingredient for success, not undermining additional skills required to realize goals teachers set for themselves and their classes.

Planning is a key factor that plays significant role in selecting the students who ought to be part of the collaborative process. Achieving a balanced classroom is easier at the elementary than at the secondary and post-secondary levels, where a certain amount of grouping takes place with course selection. A much needed equity should be kept as it relates to the national proportions of typical students, students identified as being at risk, and those who have been found to have disabilities.

Planning sections were viewed as priorities by both teachers; they refuse to let other competing responsibilities interfere with their planning session (Walther-Thomas, Bryant & Land, 1996: 260). Walther-Thomas and her associates (1996) ascertained that five planning focal points were identified by co-teachers who considered themselves to be effective co-planners. These planning focal points include:

- confidence in partner's skills;
 - design of learning environments for both the educators and students that require active involvement;
 - creation of learning and teaching environments in which each person's contributions are valued;
 - development of effective routines to facilitate in-depth planning; and
 - increased productivity, creativity and collaboration over time.
- Participants in collaborative programmes agreed that the time required for planning does not decrease during the year, but the quality of instruction continues to improve.

Teacher Education and Professional Development

As a reform agendum within the education sector, collaboration among teachers of typical and atypical students will be greatly enhanced with a consideration of this in-teachers' education and preparation. Teachers are key components for development in any educational system (Ekpo, 2005). Similarly, the National Policy on Education (2004: 39) emphasized that "since no education system may rise above the quality of its teachers, teacher education shall continue to be given major emphasis in all educational planning and development."

Therefore, based on the importance of teacher to the whole collaborative

endeavour, it is necessary to build this into her preparation programmes. There is need for an wholesome understanding that all teachers within the framework of this effort will be working with both typical and special needs students. Hence, teaching techniques, subject area(s), disability, individualization, accommodation, learning styles, and skills for collaboration in the classroom are issues for mastery by teachers.

The Roles of General and Special Needs Education Teachers in Collaborative Teaching

The willingness to give up some measures of control and accept positive, constructive criticism from colleagues becomes potent dispositions that should be brought to bear by individual teacher of this team. A manifestation of the following characteristics by each teacher will also ensure a successful collaboration, professional competencies and enthusiasm, effective organizational skills, previous experience teaming with others, commitment to planning weekly with partners, willingness to invest extra time as required, personal interest in professional growth, flexibility and openness to new ideas etc.

Therefore the team must leverage on individual's skills, training and perspectives to enhance effectiveness, pedagogy, teaching and learning opportunities. The one point that clearly developed from this relationship was that both teachers work more effectively in meeting the need of all students (Dieker & Barnett, 1996: 7). Furthermore, Ripley reiterates that the ideal responsibility of the general education teachers is the usage of their skills for instruction of students in curricula dictated by the regular school programme/system. While the special needs education teachers, on the other hand, bring about instructional delivery by adapting and developing materials to match the learning styles, strength and special needs of each of their students. Hence, it will be right to say that students' individual learning needs often dictate the curricula in special education.

It is a well organized and calculated fusion between the general educators' content specialization and special needs education teachers' assessment and adaptation specialization expertise. Both seek to advance their individual training and experience in teaching techniques and learning processes. Their collaborative goal, according to Ripley, is that all students in their class are provided with appropriate classroom and homework assignments so that each is learning; challenged and participating in the classroom process.

Importance of Collaborative Teaching

Generally, teaching is a complex task. It becomes more challenging when it involves special needs children and unconditionally sharing the task with teachers (general education teachers) who lack the professional competence to teach the targeted school population. In a quest to improve on the quality of instruction in an inclusive setting, the general and special needs education

teacher should combine their knowledge, skills and experience in teaching-learning process.

Collaborative teaching has been popularized as a new approach to make education relevant to the 21st century challenges; for instance, making Nigeria emerge as one of the biggest economy by 2020; and making it functional to the individual. Consequently, the collaborative team with different dispositions, orientations and background are brought together primarily to assess, design, programme, teach, evaluate and re-appraise the whole teaching-learning process.

Despite the individual differences, lack of commitment on the part of some members of the team; and stress associated with teaching, collaborative teaching is recommended as the best pedagogical strategy in meeting the diversity of inclusive classrooms. This stemmed from its relevance or advantages to teaching-learning process. Such advantages include:

1. Students' diverse needs are properly addressed.
2. The team share professional knowledge, skills and experiences.
3. As a result of "our" class and not "my" class psychological behaviour problems such as hyperactivity is better managed.
4. It has on the job training advantage for the general education teachers; as they co-teach/learn from the professional special educators. By this, personal and professional growth of all the participants is enhanced.
5. The design for universal learning helps the teachers and students to develop a broad-based student curriculum.
6. All the students are carried along as they learn at their individual paces.
7. It provides systematic and comprehensive observation for data collection.
8. It reduces public-teacher ratio for group instruction.
9. It offers time to develop missing skills in the students.
10. It also facilitates enrichment opportunities.

It should be noted that if collaborative teaching is not properly organized and handled, it may lead to:

1. "Type casting" the specialist with his roles.
2. Non-achievement of equal depth of content coverage.
3. Becomes difficult to coordinate the teaching and other allied role responsibilities.
4. Sharing the job not learning enrichment.
5. Clashes and complexes among the team will have untold effect on the students. thus, affirming the saying that "when two elephants fight, the grass suffers."

Conclusion

Teaching and learning activities involving the special needs children, especially in the inclusive settings require collaboration of efforts between the

general and special needs education teachers. Regrettably, there are only a handful of trained special needs education teachers employed in the regular schools. In fact, most regular schools do not even have in their staff list, teachers with special education backgrounds. This makes it next to impossible for such schools to be able to handle students with special learning needs in their mainstream school community; thus giving them half-baked education. A massive employment of special needs education teachers is therefore required to commensurate the number of regular teachers in our schools. This effort will make for effective collaborative teaching approach by both regular and the special needs education teachers feasible.

Also, there is need for provision of specialized materials to meet the learning styles of the special needs children, especially in the inclusive learning environment as propounded during the Salamanca conference in 1994. The implication therefore, is that training and retraining of the general education teachers must not be taken for granted any longer.

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