

THE RESOURCE ROOM PERSPECTIVE IN THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION OF THE SPECIAL NEEDS PERSONS IN CAMEROON

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Abstract

The principle of resource room models, its components and service was examined in some details and was found to be practical and realistic in the inclusive education of the special needs persons into the nation's educational system. The functions of the resource teacher were also highlighted. The implications of this service on the part of the special needs learners, the government, and the training institution were aptly highlighted.

Introduction

Historically, Special Education was essentially a segregated educational programme for persons with disabilities. It was earlier believed that these persons or individuals belonged to a different requires genus that characteristic practices different from those used for others. Even when the mainstreaming philosophy was introduced which was the process of educating exceptional children in the regular schools setting, much of it took place in the special class placement of the persons with disabilities in the regular school. This placement could not go on without its own limitations which were in the form of infrequent visit of the itinerant teachers, the scarcity of specialist teachers to consult and unpreparedness of the regular teacher to attend to the over educational needs of the disabled persons (Beatrice & Janet, 2003). These concerns have led to the meetings of internal bodies to meet the needs of such persons with disabilities within the school setting. And so, the issue of inclusive education came up.

Inclusion in the educational practice implies that all children in the school regardless of strengths or weaknesses in any given area of human functioning become fully integrated into the school system. The idea about inclusion was derived from two world conferences namely: World Conference on Education held in Jomtien, Thailand, 1990 and World Conference on Special Needs Education held in Salamanca, Spain in June, 1994. The idea behind inclusive education is consistent with article 2 of the 1990 document on "World Declaration of Education for All and Framework for Action to meet Basic Learning Needs". Article 2 of the World Declaration on Education for All" which focuses on the following five elements in the "expanded vision" of education:

- Universalizing access and promoting equity.
- Focusing on learning.

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- Broadening the means and scope of education
 - Enhancing the environment of learning.
 - Strengthening partnerships (Nwazuo, 2010).

And so the philosophy of inclusive education states that: Firstly, modification of regular curriculum will take place outside the classroom only if specific skills cannot be accommodated. Secondly, all pupils or students will be placed in an age – appropriate setting within the individual’s attendance area. Thirdly, every student participate in regular extra classroom activities with support to individual needs and lastly, rights of all children to participate in an inclusive way in all aspects of school life (Ihenacho, 2010). To achieve the goal behind the philosophy of inclusive education, there is a need for a resource room in the respective schools or institutions to meet the needs of the special needs learners (Ihenacho, 2010).

Philosophy of Resource Room Concept on Special Needs Education

The concept of resource room in education seems to have developed out of the need to provide continuous education long after the formal course of study has been completed. The need becomes more palpable when society achieved a faster means of information generation and dissemination in better managed media (Ozoji, Kigbu & Okeke, 1993). This situation becomes more pronounced as from the seventies. Consequently, educational planners began to think of ways of helping trained teachers keep abreast of new developments in education. One of the earliest initiatives was the concept of teacher centres. They were community based in that teachers could easily reach them in their local areas to take advantage of the availability of instructional materials.

The teacher resource centres of today are no different from the teacher centres of yester years. Today, the concept has been expanded in scope and many more functions in administration of education to meet the general needs of every learner. In Cameroon, there are teachers’ resource centres at the regional levels which help in meeting the instructional needs of the teachers to achieve their teaching – learning goals especially at the secondary education level. This type of centre is slightly different from the resource room concept characterized in Special Needs Education. The traditional resource room facility in special needs education is a one room service facility located in the regular school environment or special school setting to meet the individual needs of learners with learning problems. And one of the major thrusts for education of All Handicapped Children Act PL. 92-142, is that, handicapped children ‘to the maximum extent appropriate’ be educated with children who are not handicapped (Wikipedia, 2014). The essence of this is to ensure and maintain the principle of inclusion in the educational system which says that every child should be educated in the same environment. So the place of resource room in the inclusive education is to ensure the effectiveness of the inclusive education exercise (Nwazuo, 2010).

The purpose of a resource room is that, these students or pupil receives special instructions in an individualized or group setting for a portion of the day individual needs as defined by the student's individualized educational plan (IEP). The student getting this type of support will receive some time in the resource room, which is referred to as a 'removal from the regular education environment' portion of the day and some time in the regular classroom with modification and/ or accommodation which may include specialized instruction with their non-impaired peers. This special support within the regular education setting is part of the inclusion model (Wikipedia, 2014). Early researchers in the field of special needs education whose views still stands the test of time like Lily, (1979), consider the resource room as an opportunity for receiving special help usually on tutorial basis while spending the major part of the day in the regular class. Similarly, Smith and Neisworth, (1979), explain that, the resource room is being designed to provide needed specialized help in specific areas to individual children, while at the same time permitting them to function for the most part in the regular classroom.

The resource room is advantageous to the issues in inclusive education of to day. It helps correct the erroneous impression among many that special needs persons cannot be part of regular school environment. Its presence could engineer appropriate overall school environment that devoid of architectural barriers (Ihenacho, 2010). The communication between regular and special education appears to be further strengthened through the operation of a resource room. The consultation and cooperation between them could be very instructive to both. The special needs child or person seems to benefit the most, for it enables him/her to reap the social (e.g. bolstered self-image which could serve as a redeeming virtue) and educational (e.g. satisfaction of his unique educational needs) benefits of education in the inclusive education setting (Ihenacho, 2010). The resource teacher could work individual capacity by helping in identifying children or individuals with learning difficulties who are non disabled that could not be identify by the regular teacher or personnel. This goes a long way to reduce drop-out rate in our schools (Beatrice & Janet, 2003). In helping to achieve these benefits not only for the special needs child but also for the entire school system, the resource room facility could better be appreciated as a life wire and a half-way house in the education of special needs persons in the least restrictive environment to bridge the gap that exist between special needs learners and regular school learners for effective inclusion. (Ozaji, Kigbu & Okeke, 1993).

Environmental/ Material Requirement for the Resource Room

In the midst of numerous problems militating against educational system, it is pertinent to determine what is required to have a functional resource room facility. Such an analysis would point to the extent it could be accommodated within the limitations of the school system (Mawutor & Selete, 2004). In the context of a developing country like

Cameroon, it is not advisable to emphasize ideal requirements, for it would mean not start at all.

A typical resource room model in the school is designed for students who require daily support from a teacher of persons with disabilities. In this model, students attend regular school activities with non disabled persons and come to the resource room for intensive instructional needs that are related to their unique needs. This resource room serves as a magnet point not only for learners with problems but to teachers and other learners who need help from the resource room (Fraihat, 2007). In choosing the room, prime consideration should be given to accessibility. It should be where the special needs persons would finds it easy to use, safe to get in and out with minimal problems. This would mean that barriers on the way and around the room should be cleared or prominently marked as a cue in the interest of the special needs person especially the visually impaired (Mawutor & Seletes, 2004).

Fortification of the room with protective gadgets is necessary. The concern for security is informed by the vandalized nature of typical classrooms in this country. The room should be fitted with steel doors, windows, ceiling and, protective gadgets installed in the interest of the equipment and material to be installed (Ozaji, Kigbu & Okeke, 1993). The components of the resource room are basic infrastructural materials and equipments that will suit the unique needs of learners with disabilities and other learners as the need arises (Ozaji, Kigbu & Okeke, 1993).

The arrangement of the equipments and materials should be flexible to provide varied setting of additional or supplementary teaching, allow the special needs learners to use the materials and apparatus in the room, to enable the teacher plan curriculum adaption and a “room” for consulting with regular teachers. Perhaps, the teacher could consider setting the room for teacher work, special needs learner work and material preparation sections. The teacher section could serve as office for consulting with regular teachers; the special needs learner section could be for teaching them, their individual work/ reading; and the last section could serve for a workshop section/ demonstration and exploration experiences. The room should provide near optimum conditions for learning the general and unique contents of the school curriculum (Ozaji, Kigbu & Okeke 1993).

Operation of the Resource Room

The resource room is managed by a specialized teacher. He/she is a teacher with advanced training who is employed to provide special assistance to special needs persons and others in regular and special classes through the use of specialized materials and methods (Abang, (1992); Ozaji, Kigbu & Okeke (1993); Beatrice & Janet, (2003). The teacher has other duties which include: instructional planning, special instruction, tutorial assistance, provide other services to exceptional children, coordinate the interpretation and implementation of educational and psychological findings; provide resource material including literature, consult with other teachers and serve regular staff and parents which

relevant for inclusive education practices (Sykes & Ozoji, (1992); Beatrice & Janet (2003); Sabbah & Shanaah, 2010).

The main placement plan for the special needs learner is the regular class. He/she attends to the regular school curriculum subjects that the regular teacher feels able to provide. At schedule times, he/she leaves for the resource room for additional or supplementary teaching by the resource teacher. The available specialized materials and equipment would facilitate his learning. At the end of the resource room experience, the special needs person's returns to the regular class. Through this arrangement the school provides for both the special needs persons and their peers which are what inclusive practices stands for, that every child should be educated within the least restrictive environment. The resource room teacher shares his time appropriately between the special needs persons and teachers. Even at that, more time should be given to the special needs learners (Sykes and Ozoji, (1992), Beatrice and Janet, 2003).

Discussion

A resource room should carry out the business of learning material resource production, display and usage in the learning process. Learning materials are considered enabling of the teaching learning process for all children if the special needs learners are to learn like others, if they must be educated in the inclusive setting, than educational planners cannot do without a resource room facility (Ihenacho, 2010). It follows that a well managed resource room philosophy and practice provides for integration of special needs education in the primary, secondary and higher education system, for it offers the special needs learners the half-way house he/she needs to be in the regular school. This is affirmed by a study of Sabbah & Shanaah (2010), which showed that, principals, teachers and educational supervisors were highly satisfied with the effectiveness of the resource room and its tools, methodologies, educational programmes and equipments. The earlier analysis of resource room requirement has shown it could be quite expensive. This agrees with Lily's (1975) apt option that "special education is an expensive undertaking, not only in some absolute sense, but also in comparison to standard educational programmes". This fact bears a lot of implications. Ihenacho (2010), states in his situation analysis for inclusion education that, resources and stakeholders must be determined, access and availability of the resources must be identified and be ready in a resource room or centre. For this will go a long way to minimize the risk of duplication of efforts and will increase the prospects for cooperation and sustainability of programmes.

In Cameroon, education is managed by various ministries of education. The Ministry of Basic Education is for the primary education, Ministry of Secondary Education for secondary and high schools while the Ministry of Higher Education for all higher institutions in the country. The Ministry of Social Welfare comes in to play their role to meet the needs of special needs learners in the educational system.

Administratively, we should provide for three categories of the resource room facility. The first is the categorical resource room for the visually impaired and should be selectively located in the school system. The non-categorical resource room type would be for all other categories of special needs learners and should be located in every single educational institution that has an inclusive pupil or student. The multi-purpose resource room would be the one which attends to all special needs learners and is usually located in higher institutions where different types of exceptionalities are found (e.g. gifted and talented, visually impaired, hearing impaired, physically challenged, etc.) The base for categorization of the resource room facility is the peculiar nature of equipment and material demand of that condition. This helps to identify weakness, strengths and according to each category and services are tailored accordingly (Vaughn, Erlbaum & Boardman, 2001). Through this administrative arrangement, every special needs person who is qualified to be in the inclusive class (in terms of social and academic maturity, minimal disability) would have the facility and personnel to attend to him/ her. This will increase their acceptance in the community and improve their self awareness, social skills and self esteem (Philips, (1990); Vaughn, Erlbaum & Boardman, 2001).

In terms of personnel, the resource room facility at all levels of education places a heavy demand on competent specialist teachers. Two things are required. The training institutions would require to step up personnel training; the government/ higher institutions should adopt an aggressive policy on employing at least specialist teacher wherever a resource room is located, and ultimately, in all institutions of learning. The joint partnership between the training institutions and employers of labour should be generative of ways of identifying relevant competencies for trainees and that of maintaining teacher effectiveness on the placement in the facility. While the training institutions may be said to be doing the expected in the partnership, the government appear to have lost sight of what role the special educators could play in the educational system. In Cameroon, the school for social welfare trains personnel to work in special centres and schools whose number is limited compared to the need of inclusive education setting.

It is therefore strongly advised that the government of Cameroon including higher institutions should rethink on need of special educators. The University of Buea is the only higher education institution that is training special educators but they are not being used by the government. So they should be attitude change towards employing (hiring) special educators into the educational system of Cameroon if inclusive education is to be achieved in the country. A new policy of employing at least one special educator per school unit should be given a serious consideration.

Conclusion

The resource room facility is an integral component in the education of persons with disabilities. Teaching – learning processes of special needs learner whether in a

special school or regular school most make use of the resource room facilities because the unique needs of these learners are delivered in the resource room. This resource room where ever located should have the basic components that is required for complete services delivery of the various categories of special needs learners as the inclusive education model states that, they should be educated in the least restrictive environment. So, resource room perspective in the inclusive education system will go a long way to enhanced inclusive model practices.

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