

Benefits and challenges of an integrated approach to working with children

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Introduction

Many families who have children with additional needs often fear sending their children to mainstream schools (Wang 2009). Such parents often fear that their children will not be treated equally in mainstream school, and also worry about how well their specific needs can be met (NCSE 2011). As such they often place them in special settings with low student-pupil ratios and with specialized teaching. However, the effectiveness of special settings has recently been questioned.

Placing children with special needs in special settings has been a subject of considerable debate over the past few years (Wall 2011). While the general public view is that special needs students can benefit from individual and small group instruction, there is no compelling evidence to support this claim. In fact, the opposite seems true. According to a study conducted by Casey et al (1998), it was found that special schools with curricula designed specifically for special needs students did not necessarily result in better improvements in children's cognitive ability or developmental outcomes.

A similar study by Bunch & Valeo (1997) came to similar conclusions. It was claimed that special placement of children with additional needs has not demonstrated substantive advantages over mainstream classes, despite specialized teaching and lower teacher to pupil ratio. More recent researches by Brown et al (2005) and Allen & Cowdery (2005) have made similar conclusions. In this regard, this paper examines the key benefits and challenges of an integrated approach to working with children with additional needs and their families in an early years setting.

Defining the term ‘ Additional needs’

Before exploring further, it is worthwhile to first define the term ‘ additional needs’. This term is used in reference to certain conditions or circumstances that might lead to children requiring special support (Owens 2009). Children with additional needs are mainly those that have health conditions and needs related to learning and physical development (Roffey 2001). That is, children with additional needs include: those who are physically handicapped, those with developmental delay or intellectual disability, communication disorders and those diagnosed with conditions such as Down syndrome, Autism or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Owens 2009).

‘ Inclusion’

Having defined the term ‘ additional needs’, it is important to understand the context in which the term ‘ inclusion’ is used. As Connor (2006) points out, the concept of inclusion is used to describe placement of children with additional needs in regular settings rather than special facilities. It should be noted that inclusion goes beyond just teaching the child in inclusive classroom settings and includes the quality of the child’s experience of school life and association with other peers.

Legislative framework.

Key legislations governing provision of services to special needs children include the ‘ Education(NI) Order 1996’ and the ‘ Special Education Needs and Disability (NI) Order 2005’ (DoE 2009). The former outlines the rights and duties of the following in relation to special needs students:

schools,

parents, Health and Social Services Boards,

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Education and Library Boards

Department of Education It also sets out a Code of Practice and establishes an arrangement for issuing a statement and assessment of these children's education needs (Porter 2003). The ' Special Education Needs and Disability (NI) Order 2005' resulted from amendments made to the first one to include the right of special needs children to mainstream education and introduction of new disabilitydiscriminationresponsibilities (DoE 2009).

Integrated approach

In the UK, these children with special needs are integrated into the mainstream schools provided that there is adequate equipment, enough staff and the right resources to ensure that they achieve their full potential (Heinemann & Vickerman 2009). However, it is not mandatory for mainstream schools to enroll children with special needs. Rather, it depends on the ability of the school itself to meet their needs. If the mainstream school setting cannot provide for their needs, the child is placed under the local authority which then seeks to provide solutions (Silberfeld 2009). There is a growing recognition of the benefits of including special needs students in mainstream schools as opposed to remedial settings. Now more than ever, there is an increased emphasis on collaborative model and joint working to ensure that children with special needs are included in mainstream education (Duke & Smith 2007). Perhaps this has been driven by the recognition of its benefits and increasing trend in children in need of special attention. The number of children with educational needs in the UK has been on the rise over the past few years. For example, their proportion

as a percentage of the total school population increased from 14.6% in 2003 to 17.7% in 2007 (DoE 2009).

Benefits

There are several benefits for such an integrated approach to working with children with special needs. First, such inclusive programs will help other children to understand them, accept them, appreciate and value their similarities and differences (Sammons et al. 2003). This will enable them to see each person as an individual as opposed to seeing them in terms of their needs.

Another benefit to such an integrated approach is the reduction in stigma. There is compelling evidence that shows that placing children with special needs in mainstream schools in the early stages can significantly reduce stigma (Griffin 2008). Inclusion programmes have the potential to facilitate a relationship that can be mutually beneficial for both groups of students. It allows children from both groups to develop awareness and to value their differences, thereby reducing stigmatization and labeling. An integrated approach to learning enhances social integration and reduces stigmatization and prejudice against children with special needs (Griffin 2008).

Inclusion also reflects the acceptance of special needs children in the society. The integrated approach makes children with special needs to feel accepted to the society and by their peers and gives them a sense of belonging (Robinson & Jones-Diaz 2005). Such inclusive programmes can as well be of benefit to the parents. All that parents want is for their children to live typical lives like other students including being accepted by their friends and peers (Owens 2009). Families' visions of having their children

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experience typical life like other regular students can come true (Weston 2010) Furthermore, maintaining an inclusive setting can be more economical than running a special setting (Weston 2010). Additionally, the economic outputs can be greater when special needs students are educated in mainstream schools because of the self-sufficiency skills stressed in such settings (Mitchell 2009). Other benefits to such an integrated approach include: improved academic performance, opportunity to participate in typical experiences of childhood, and gaining confidence to pursue inclusion in other settings such as recreational groups (Jones 2004).

Research seems to suggest that special need children perform better when placed together with other peers in the natural setting (Brown et al., 2005). As Allen & Cowdery (2005) points out, special need children who receive services such as occupational therapy, language therapy and special education perform even better when provided with these services in the natural settings with their typically developing peers.

Challenges

While the arguments in favour of integration are valid, it should also be remembered that integration in itself is a two-way process. In most cases, the benefits of integration have been argued from the side of special needs student. What about the other group of students. Aren't they going to be affected by the way services are devoted to special needs students?

Such an integrated approach raises several key challenges. One particular challenge relates to the issue of fairness. Given their inclusion in mainstream classrooms, how can fairness be determined? What is fair for a typical average student? And what is fair for a special needs student (Swartz 2005)? It is <https://assignbuster.com/benefits-and-challenges-of-an-integrated-approach-to-working-with-children/>

questionable whether the educational needs of these students can be met in mainstream classes especially given that they requires some sort of specialized services and special attention as well. There is a danger that the attention given to the special needs students will affect the quality of services that the regular students receive (Hoccut 1996). Given the developmental delays that most special needs students experience, the other regular students may rate themselves with these students in terms of academic performance which eventually might lead to the decline in their creativity and critical thinking capabilities (Wang 2009). Can this be termed as fair to either group? This remains a major challenge to such inclusion programmes.

Another challenge relates to the aggressive nature of some of these children. Coping with emotionally and behaviourally disturbed children can be particularly challenging for both the students and teachers (Cohen et al 2004). This can be seen with the recent push by some schools for 'responsible inclusion'. Some of these children mental health needs are beyond what the mainstream education can deliver and as such can be disruptive to other students. Schools have become de facto mental health providers for children with special needs yet they were not set up for such purposes (Heinneman & Vickerman 2009).

Despite these challenges, the focus should be on promoting integration of special needs students into the mainstream education. While there are many arguments in favour of and against integrations, the benefits for such integration are significant. Those in favour of special facilities argue that

these facilities are best for children with special needs in that it helps them maintain self-esteem and experience greater success (Cohen et al. 2004). They argue that segregation helps them with self-esteem and protects them from stigmatization. To some extent, they raise a valid argument especially given that the mainstream schools do not have enough human resources and adequate material for catering for the needs of such children (Hocutt 1996).

However, such an approach will only further enhance stigmatization and negative labelling. Also, it might lead to social isolation from their peers and a lack of academic press, and higher order thinking among children with special needs. Moreover, placing such students in special facilities conjures up images which render them as failures and this may further reinforce their low-self esteem (Cohen et al 2004). Perhaps this might be the reason why some of these students become physically aggressive or verbally abusive. They end up viewing aggression as the only way to be recognized (Cohen et al 2004).

There are several benefits to such an intergrated approach to learning including better social adjustment and stigma reduction. Children with special needs may also benefit from inclusion programs through participating in typical experiences of childhood, gaining an understanding about diversity of people in the community, and gaining the confidence to pursue inclusion in other settings such as recreational groups (Nutbrown & Clough 2010). Other regular students may benefit from the opportunity to meet and share

experiences with special needs students, and developing positive attitudes towards students with varied abilities (Weston 2003).

There is a need to ensure that these students receive as broad and balanced an entitlement curriculum as possible, similar to that received by the regular students (Cohens et al. 2004). Regardless of their condition or of the developmental delays that children with special needs may experience, they should all be allowed to learn and participate in everyday routines just like other children (Weston 2003). It should be remembered that children of all ages have the same intrinsic value and are entitled to the same opportunities for participation in child care.

Conclusion

Research has shown that special needs students who are mixed with their peers in mainstream classrooms are more likely to achieve better outcomes academically and socially while those in segregated classes fall further behind. There are, however, challenges to such an integrated approach to working with special needs children. Challenges related to coping with emotionally and behaviourally disturbed children and the challenge of ensuring fairness have been highlighted in this paper.

Despite these challenges, the paper calls for an integrated approach to working with children with special needs. Unless there is a compelling reason to put special needs children in special settings, they should be placed in the mainstream educational setting. To ensure the success of this integrated approach, it is important that all the professionals involved value and appreciate their individual roles and those of others in order to ensure that

these children receive best education, care and support. Families must also show their commitment to the multi-disciplinary partnership approaches.

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