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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: APPROACHES, SCOPE AND CONTENT

International advocacy for inclusion has had a direct influence on the conceptualization of including students with special needs in education in Barbados. One such example is The World Conference on Education for All (EFA) held in Thailand in 1990 which placed emphasis on inclusive education and sought to ensure that steps were taken to provide equal access to education to every category of disabled persons as an integrated part of the education system. Decades earlier, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted that education was a basic human right. In Barbados, The White Paper on Education Reform (1995), has as its motto “ Each One Matters” - firmly stating Government’s commitment to pursuing the concept of “least restrictive educational environment” and of “integrating the mentally and physically challenged into the mainstream of the school system....”.

The selection of this theme is based on the focus of attention to diversity and respect of individual differences. This fits in with the fundamental underlying philosophy of education which is to advance the view that quality education must do more than equip persons to secure and maintain gainful employment, but must prepare them to be critical thinkers, innovators and problem-solvers. It should also inculcate the best social values and promote tolerance.

Inclusive education refers to the philosophy that ensures students with varied abilities are supported in chronologically age-appropriate general education classes in their home schools and receive specialised instruction delineated by their individualized education programmes (IEPs) within the context of the national curriculum and general class activities.

- It ensures that all students of the school are fully included and have a voice in the school affairs
- It promotes an environment that ensures access, acceptance, belonging and a sense of community.

At present in Barbados a new special needs policy is being designed this should fully encompass all aspects of inclusion. Within the past ten years the Ministry of Education has sought to focus its attention on inclusive education and has focused on two basic models of inclusion:

(a) The pull-out programme

In this model, the students who have been identified as experiencing special educational needs spend part of their time in general education and part of their time in the resource centre where they engage in small group instruction focused on their particular needs. The Learning Support Coordinator also goes into their classes to work with individual or small groups.

(b) Full inclusion

In this model, students with special needs remain in their classroom all of the time and participate either with adaptations or modifications, to the curriculum.

Common classroom conditions can and do affect some students adversely. However, students with learning disabilities are among the most vulnerable at chronic risk for not learning. The Barbadian concept of inclusive education is therefore targeted mainly at students who were not benefiting from the delivery of their education. These are students who were failing through inadequate provisions of resources. Special attention had to be paid to students who are at risk of repetition and drop out. It was also targeted at mild to moderately mentally challenged students who would have previously been removed from the general education classes and assigned to a special education unit at select primary schools across the island. It also focused on students with physical and mobility challenges.

One of the major sources of exclusion is a small group of children with severe to profound mental and physical disabilities and children experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties which are considered permanent in nature. These children have disorders relating to the nervous system and locomotor systems.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: PUBLIC POLICIES

Barbados has a traditionally sound academic educational system facilitating social mobility for the population. Given that economic and technological change is continually presenting new challenges, education and training need to respond to in ways that promote personal and national development. To do this, it was therefore necessary for a national curriculum at the primary and secondary levels. to be designed. The new curricula were implemented through a phased process since 2000.

The objectives of Curriculum Reform are to:

1. prepare students who are creative, numerate, literate, well trained and readily retainable at any point on their development,
2. ensure that all students understand the necessity of being able to live and work harmoniously with other persons in their environment
3. increase the efficacy of the teaching/learning process by encouraging teachers to shift to the child-centred and more collaborative forms of learning in their classrooms
4. prepare students for life in a technologically-advanced society by ensuring that all students who leave school in the twenty-first century have a good knowledge of, adequate skill in, and favourable attitudes towards the use of information technology.

The revised curricula have the following underlying philosophical and psychological premises: For example, children

- Learn at different rates;
- Have different learning styles;
- Respond to a variety of stimuli; and
- Learn best what interests them and what is meaningful to their lives

Children must, therefore, be given opportunities to:

1. Operate at different levels within the classroom;
2. Experience multiple methods of learning and assessment
3. Think divergently, and
4. Apply the knowledge gained to real-life situations

Under curricular reform the Ministry's policy of inclusion aim to ensure that there is equality in educational opportunity and that all students benefit from the same quality of education being offered.

The Barbados Ministry of Education recognised the role of teachers is critical to the success of inclusion. The Ministry has demonstrated its commitment by providing over BDS 2 million dollars in special needs education training in collaboration with the Mount St. Vincent University in Halifax Canada. Erdiston Teachers Training College facilitated training for teachers with teaching practices that promote equity, equality and equal opportunity. To date eighty-three teachers have gained degrees at the Masters levels in Inclusionary Practices and Curriculum Development, nine teachers at the Bachelors level in Special Education and fourteen teachers read for the Masters in Educational Psychology in deaf or hard of hearing/blind or visually impaired education.

Priority was also given to the refurbishment of schools to include ramps and in the one case of the school catering to students who are deaf and blind, an elevator was installed to give physical access. Bathrooms for this particular group of students are currently being refurbished to facilitate students with physical disabilities. Where students are registered in schools where these facilities are not readily available, every effort is made to provide adequate accommodation to ensure accessibility for students.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: SYSTEMS, LINKS AND TRANSITIONS:

Inclusive schools require pedagogies that are sensitive to the social construction of difference in the school system and in society at large. Barbados has a national curriculum and schools either adapt or modify the curricula to meet the needs of diverse learners. Adaptation may include alternative formats, for example Braille readers and assistive devices. A constructivist philosophy is also infused into the curriculum and arising out of this philosophy is the notion that students who are actively engaged in their own learning are likely to experience greater success in the classroom. The general education structure also includes different modes of assessment with teachers engaging in more authentic assessments, e.g. orals, interviews, exhibitions, portfolios, project-based work and norm-referenced tests, beneficial to classrooms of diverse learners.

The curriculum was restructured to accommodate individual students to proceed at a rate commensurate with their aptitudes and abilities. For example early sitting of the Barbados Secondary Entrance Examination, deferrals and exemptions. At the secondary level, students may now complete schooling in six or seven years.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: LEARNERS AND TEACHERS:

Teachers participating in Special Needs training programme were given the opportunities to develop the skills and competencies to attend to their classrooms of diverse learners. They developed skills in:

- strategies and practice learner-centred, teacher facilitator modes to support the teaching/learning process,
- in learner assessment strategies,
- strategies that support and enhance programme planning and the delivery of alternative modes of instruction to meet the needs of learners with exceptionalities in the regular classroom and school through the use of individualized learning plans and assessment,
- strategies and practices that support and enable meaningful inclusion of a range of learning styles, a
- varying leadership models in school curriculum and school leadership along with implications for collaborative practice
- strategies to address at risk learners in literacy and numeracy at the elementary and secondary levels,
- strategies to support a variety of classroom management practices.

The teachers who participated in the training were recently assigned as Learning Support Coordinators and classroom teachers. It is therefore difficult to produce quantitative data and their impact on schools. Qualitative reports indicate the following:

- Increased awareness in special needs education and in society at large
- Increased expertise in teacher skills in facilitating students with diverse needs in the classrooms
- Increased expertise in special needs education
- More students are being provided with adaptive curriculum programmes indicated by their Individual Educational Plans in chronologically age-appropriate general education classrooms
- Enhanced student academic performance for a small number of students who have been able to improve to a point where they no longer require any adaptations but are monitored on a regular basis.
- Noted improvements in student's self esteem, self-confidence and in some cases improvements in behaviour.

One Graduate from the Inclusionary Masters programme is quoted as saying....."People involved in the inclusion process need to be committed to making it work. Inclusion needs to be seen as the responsibility for all, not just the special education teacher. Teachers should feel supported by their Heads; they need to have a sense of ownership of inclusion. This will only happen when they are given appropriate and sufficient training about inclusion. When teachers are actively involved in the day to day decision making process, the environment will change to one that fosters collaborative, cooperative working practices."