

“Integrated” Special Education

Rawatee Maharaj-Sharma

If we cannot teach students with disabilities how to interact with and how to learn with their peers without disabilities, how can we possibly expect them to graduate, work, and be part of our community and the society at large? This was a question raised by a teacher at a recent gathering of teachers where the participants engaged in a round-table discussion on special education and the classroom requirements of students with special needs.

The various types of disabilities that qualify a student for special education programmes range from specific learning disabilities such as speech or language impairments, through mental retardation and multiple disabilities, to orthopedic impairments and traumatic brain injury. Autism and cerebral palsy are examples of disabilities that qualify a student for special education.

In August 2006, the US Congress published final regulations for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), originally enacted in 1975 but revised several times over the years, with the most recent amendment passed in December 2004. IDEA guides states and school districts on the provision of all-inclusive education for students with disabilities, in an attempt to afford students with disabilities equal opportunity to participate in classroom learning. This approach has met with great acceptance by many, especially parents of disabled students and the students themselves, but has met with resistance from some traditionalists who believe that students with special needs should be schooled separately.

Against this background, local teachers at the round-table discussion married their own experiences with the new ideas and developments from current research in the area of special education, and proposed the term “integrated” special education to describe attempts to facilitate all-inclusive education. They defined the concept as “classroom teaching that caters for students with special needs as well as those without special needs.” It was further suggested that with the number of special needs students increasing annually, that there is urgent need to review and revisit curriculum, inclusive of delivery, relevance, and classroom environment, to seamlessly include students with special needs in all classrooms.

Educators agree that it goes against all the philosophical underpinnings of educational theory to ask a teacher who graduated with a B.Sc. degree in physics, and who has been assessed to teach physics, to go into an “integrated” special education classroom and to meaningfully teach physics to ALL the students in that classroom. In reality, however, this is the exact demand that is made of many of our teachers, most of whom are severely challenged to the extent of frustration, in some cases, when called upon to

teach students with special needs in their classrooms. Teachers at the round-table discussion agreed that there are two fundamental issues that seem to have been largely ignored, and to which thorough consideration must be given if the idea of “integrated” special education is to be given a chance.

Firstly, “integrated” special education has to be conceptualised very carefully in terms of the physical and infrastructural accommodation as well as the technical support that must be in place for students with special needs. This has implications for the design and construction, as well as the geographical and topographical location, of our educational institutions to ensure accessibility, versatility, and flexibility for students with special needs. Ramps, elevators, automatic doors, and larger classrooms are some features that will have to be the norm in all schools.

Secondly, the competence and capabilities of teachers will have to be expanded through the provision of specialised teacher training modules on the psychological and sociological demands of special education delivery, as well as the skills, techniques, and strategies that will be suitable for the implementation of all-inclusive educational practices in the classroom. At all levels, oral examinations and other relevant performance assessment tasks will have to be included as standard modes of evaluation, with equivalent recognition and value as traditional modes of evaluation.

It is indeed commendable that members within our local teaching fraternity can demonstrate concern and initiative for educating our students with special needs. It would be even more commendable if further discussions and research in this area could be given priority status, particularly in the areas of curriculum changes, supplementary aids/equipment, and the provision of specialised facilities that would allow students to participate in the educational environment to the fullest extent possible. Special consideration for development in these areas is needed if our students with special needs are to access subject matter, gain physical access to the school, and have their emotional needs met.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine