

Classroom Communication and Placement of the Deaf Child in an Inclusive Class

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ABSTRACT Inclusiveness is an educational reform aiming at redesigning the general education structures to accommodate both able-bodied learners and learners with disabilities. This is a departure from an old practice of training special needs learners in special schools. This new reform however faces some challenges. For instance, placing the deaf schoolchild in an inclusive class with the hearing classmates would require a communication mode that is acceptable to all parties and is also very effective for dispensing classroom instructions. This paper therefore identifies total communication as the functional communication mode considered most appropriate for use in an inclusive class for hearing and nonhearing learners. The paper highlights the qualities of total communication. It also discusses means for enhancing the use of this communication option to facilitate the realization of inclusive education objectives.

INTRODUCTION

The movement towards placing all special needs learners in the same learning environment with nondisabled learners has been described as one of the most contentious professional issues ever engaged in the field of special education (Hallahan and Kauffman, 1994). This is because debates for and against total inclusion and partial inclusion (those of a more conservative persuasion) have nearly torn the field of special education apart. Inclusion has therefore become one of the most contentious issues in the field of special education in the recent times (Bracker, 1995). Though inclusion started as a social issue in the 1980s, it has however grown to be a significant educational reform programme in the 1990s and 2000s.

Milner (2000) defined inclusion as a reform process aiming at ensuring that all learners, regardless of their physical or sensory defects have access to the whole range of educational and social opportunities offered by the school. Inclusion therefore implies the removal of all persons and learners with disabilities from segregated settings (institutions and special schools) into the community living and regular classes where they can live and learn side by side with nondisabled persons or learner (Westwood, 1999).

Inclusion also depicts the preparedness of the nondisabled populace (both in schools and in communities) to admit and tolerate the persons

with disabilities. As Farrell (2000) put it, inclusion reflects the extent to which a school or a community welcomes individuals with disabilities as full members of the regular schools or the community and values them as inseparable and respected members or citizens. Inclusion therefore is underpinned by the philosophy of love and acceptance by the nondisabled persons for persons with disabilities (Ainscow, 1997). It entails a framework within which all persons regardless of their conditions and disadvantages have equal accessibility to available social, political, educational and economic opportunities services in a society (Vadeh and Anongo, 2004).

As an educational enterprise inclusion hinges on a philosophy that all learners regardless of their disabilities are a vital and integral part of the general education system (Westwood, 1995). As a result, the general education should therefore provide these learners (who require special attention, intervention and support systems) with necessary provisions capable of preparing them as competent as their able-bodied colleagues for a quality future life experience (Davis, 1990). Inclusion therefore proposes a merger between general education and special education. Regular class teachers would be required to cater for the needs of an increasingly diverse group of students (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994). The special educators' roles would include that of providing itinerant or resource room services as well as providing support services in inclusive schools (Hallahan and Kauffman, 1994).

The goal of inclusion therefore is not to erase differences in learners but to enable all learners to belong within an educational community which validates and values the learners' individuality (Stainback et al., 1994). Consequently, the political factor underlying the inclusion movement is basically a human rights one. As the entire world has almost adopted democracy, then the need for giving concrete demonstration to equal rights principle in all societal practices became more compelling (Aromolaran, 2004). Democracy emphasizes equal opportunities and equal treatment for all without recourse to race, religion, status or conditions. It entails that for no reason should anyone be segregated from the mainstreams of his or her society (Heward, 2000). As a result; the rights of persons with disabilities should be as supremely respected as that of nondisabled persons. Schoolchildren with disabilities for instance, should be placed in any school of their choice. They should not be exclusively restricted to special schools (Okuyibo, 2001). There must be no objection by any neighbourhood school should any special needs pupils wish to be placed in regular class alongside their nondisabled peers (UNESCO, 1994).

Recent developments in special education indicate that inclusion movement has succeeded in rechannelling the special needs school children from special schools to regular schools (Hallahan and Kauffman, 1994). In Nigeria for instance, there have been a number of regular schools redesignated as integrated schools. They were restructured to accommodate both nondisabled and special needs school children (Mba, 1995). The Nigerian national policy on education recommended integration as the preferred placement alternative for the Nigerian special needs schoolchildren (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1981). The 2004 revised edition of the same policy (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004) has again emphatically replaced integration with inclusion meaning that the general and special education in Nigeria would again be restructured to give way for total mixing and education of nondisabled and special needs schoolchildren in the same learning environment (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). This is what inclusive school or inclusive class is all about. It is full time placement of children with mild, moderate and severe disabilities in regular classrooms to learn alongside the able-bodied pupils (Staub and Peck, 1995).

THE DEAF SCHOOLCHILD IN AN INCLUSIVE CLASS

The deaf schoolchild is among other special needs schoolchildren considered for placement in inclusive classes. His or her major disability is the inability to perceive or hear speech or sounds through his or her sense of hearing (Mba, 1995).

Heward (2000) reported that approximately, eighty-two percent of the schoolchildren who are deaf or have some significant difficulty in hearing do attend public schools in United States. Thirty-six percent of such schoolchildren receive most of their education in regular classrooms. Sequel to the official endorsement of the inclusive school placement for special needs children in Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004), almost all thirty six states in the country have set up integrated or inclusive schools to admit and train able-bodied children and special needs children together. Lagos state (a state in the southwest region of Nigeria) alone has set up thirty-one inclusive schools where deaf schoolchildren with other special needs schoolchildren receive education in the same learning environment with their nondisabled colleagues.

Expectedly, inclusive education practices are not without some constraints or challenges (Vaughn and Schumn, 1995). Those challenges range from difficulties in securing the necessary social fusion between nondisabled and special needs learners in mainstream classes to the problems of determining the appropriate instructional language acceptable to all learners in an inclusive class. For a deaf schoolchild, his or her hearing classmate and the teacher (regular or special), choosing the most effective and acceptable communication medium is perhaps the greatest hurdle to crack. As Ademokoya (2007) noted, the major tragedy with the deaf person is the failure of communication. As far as inclusiveness is concerned, the classroom communication challenge is basically that of finding an appropriate language of instruction in an inclusive class for hearing and nonhearing learners.

Classroom Communication and the Deaf Schoolchild

As earlier stated, the greatest disadvantage which hearing loss places on individuals is the deprivation of communication opportunities

(Heward, 2000). Classroom communication to be very specific is about using a suitable language to convey and decode ideas or meanings, to exchange views, explain processes or demonstrate skills (Buscemi, 1996). Education communication is needful for transmitting information and imparting information or knowledge (Curzon, 1991).

Ekwama (2003) opined that classroom communication is the most important issue to consider when discussing on successful teaching and learning experiences with the deaf schoolchild. This is because it is the very aspect where his or her disability poses the most challenge for him or her and his or her teacher.

The very communication mode most debated on is speech. Speech is the most conventional and most used form of communication in any human settlement (Ademokoya, 1996). Unfortunately, this is the greatest potential which hearing loss deprives the deaf schoolchild and the greatest asset anyone could wish him or her (Van Riper, 1982). Learning is best conducted via spoken language (Ayodele, 1988). This is because speech is the most conventional medium of communication for all humans (Bakare, 1988). As a result much of learning and information transmission are done orally (Mba, 1995). Even when speaking and signing simultaneously as is often the practice while engaging total communication (Speech and signs) to teach deafchildren, more things are said than signed (Ademokoya, 1995).

Whosoever therefore encounters difficulty in speaking clearly, intelligently or proficiently may be considered unfit to learn. He or she could be given a very slim chance of success in academic endeavours. Undoubtedly, educators are aware of the unrivaled importance of oral language in teaching/learning processes (Okeke, 2003). However, since the deaf schoolchild lacks this great potential the choice of other forms of communication at least to serve as speech substitute and to permit him to learn as much as possible became very imperative.

Oral communication facilitates meaningful teacher-learner interactions than any other form of communication. It makes learning more readily mediated than writing, signing, gesticulating, pantomiming or whatever medium (Ekwama, 2003). Various school related factors such as behaviour expatriation, interpersonal relations (between learners and learners or learners and

teachers) and quality delivery of teaching characterized by effective questioning and individualized feedback are best fostered by oral classroom communication (Elliott, Kratochwill and Travers, 2000).

Though sign language (the American Sign Language) has become the accepted language of communication for persons with hearing disability, Okeke (2003) noted this choice was more of necessity than of preference. The incontestable superiority of speech over signs has been confirmed as far back as 1880 at the International Conference on Deafness held in Milan. Abang (1995) asserted that the same conference recommended speech as the best form of communication for use in schools for deaf persons. This is still the practice in many schools for deaf children in United States (Heward, 2000).

Classroom Communication in an Inclusive Class

The preceding section of this paper presented some learning and social challenges which lack of oral communication poses to the deaf schoolchild. However, it must also be noted that it is not only the deaf schoolchild that faces instructional communication problem in an inclusive class, his or her hearing mate as well as his or her teacher also have their share of the problem to contend with. Indeed, the greatest threat confronting the placement of a deaf schoolchild in an inclusive class is the difficulty in finding an acceptably effective language of instruction. This challenge could be summarily delineated out as follows:

- i. The sign language often employed to communicate classroom instructions to the deaf schoolchild is not as impactful as speech.
- ii. The hearing classmate in an inclusive uses only the oral language as opposed to sign language used by his or her deaf peer yet there is a need to evolve a common language acceptable to the two groups.
- iii. Prior to the adoption of inclusion, the regular classroom teacher has been conducting his teaching activities orally with the hearing schoolchildren. The coming of the deaf schoolchild necessitated that the teacher become very proficient in sign language. This is a no mean challenge for many regular teachers who for long have conducted their teaching orally.

- iv. The special education teacher coming to an inclusive class equally faces the challenge of a need to balance the classroom instructions conducted by oral and manual (sign) media. This may not be easy as one could assume especially if the concerned special teacher has been teaching deaf pupils with sign language for long before his or her reassignment to an inclusive class.

There must therefore be a way out of these communication hurdles since for now inclusion has come to stay. As Ekwama (2003) observed finding a functional communication mode for all participants in an inclusive class is very important so that all can maximally benefit from the inclusive education programme. Such a communication mode should not only be capable of fostering a better reintegration of the deaf schoolchild his or her larger society or improve his or her academic standards; it must also be acceptable and usable to the hearing classmates as well as being very inspiring for the teacher to use. Once such a communication mode is found then social interaction and academic achievements of hearing and non-hearing classmates will be greatly enhanced. The teacher will equally become more motivated to work for the attainment of inclusive education goals.

The Total Communication Option

Total communication refers to a language practice commonly used with persons having hearing disability. As its name implies, it consists of a wide range of various methods of communication to provide an unlimited opportunity for developing language competence with deaf persons as well as facilitating interactions between them and the hearing people (Ekwama, 2003). It therefore includes speech, audition, speech reading, signing, gesturing, fingerspelling, pantomime, reading, writing, drawing, drama and other available or possible means of engaging in instructional and non-instructional communications with the non-hearing persons (Rickeof, 2000).

Invention of total communication was spurred by the need to overcome communication barriers often faced by the deaf members in various communities (Ayuba et al., 2003). Its philosophy was shaped up from deliberations on evolving a communication mode which will as much as possible permit two way communication between the deaf schoolchild and

his/her teacher as well as with his or her non-hearing classmate. As a result Okeke (2003) claimed that total communication is adjudged the best communication option to adopt for a mainstream class of both hearing and non-hearing learners.

Total communication approach works better than other communication alternatives in an inclusive education arrangement since it allows for a resourceful use of verbal and non-verbal communicative skills. It therefore facilitates better social interactions and academic instructions among all members of an inclusive class.

Indeed, the professionals working with the deaf and hard of hearing persons extensively considered various communication options in their search for one which will be most suitable for use in an inclusive class. It was a brainstorming task to select the best out of many alternatives such as audition, speechreading, fingerspelling, Rochester method, auditory training and amplification systems, manual communication cuedspeech, total communication and so on. However, total communication gained some considerable acceptance from the professionals (Ekwama, 2003). It is not only the hearing-impaired pupil who will constructively benefit from it but also the deafblind, the speech-disordered plus the hearing pupils and teachers.

Total communication also fits well into a classroom where oralism or speech has been in use. It also utilizes all the sense modalities which as a result enhances greater learning inputs and outputs for the users (Abang, 1995). Consequently, users of total communication have recorded greater gains educationally, psychologically and socially than experienced with other communicative media except speech (Okeke, 2003). For the purpose of inclusive education, total communication was reported to have been expanded well beyond the original simultaneous communication roots (Ayuba et al 2003). It has been expanded in such away that all repertoire of communication approaches were refined to respond appropriately to meeting all needs of members of an inclusive class.

Enhancing the Use of Total Communication for Inclusive Education

i. Interest and Proficiency in Total Communication: Having adopted total communication as the preferred communication

mode for engaging the deaf schoolchild in inclusive education, the regular teachers and hearing learners, school administrators, school workers and other specialists involved in the inclusive education should endeavour to develop love and interest in the use of total communication. By so doing, they would have the necessary will or motivation to learn and become more skillful in all components of total communication such as sign language, fingerspelling, and pantomime. Developing love and interest in total communication must be complemented with the determination to improve proficiency in the use of total communication.

As teachers and hearing schoolmates engage themselves in purposeful learning of total communication, they also need to constantly practice it with the users such as the deaf schoolchildren, special teachers, interpreters and others. Doing so will not only promote the joy of using total communication, it will definitely improve skills in it. Furthermore, it will facilitate greater social and emotional attachment between the hearing and non-hearing members in an inclusive class. A major goal of inclusiveness is to bring about mutual relationships between able-bodied members and their colleagues with disabilities in every society. Total communication is indeed a veritable means for achieving this goal.

ii. Parental Involvement: Parents must particularly be encouraged to learn and use total communication. They are indeed an indispensable component of inclusive education. Their active involvement is therefore very vital to the success of inclusive education. The success of any intervention programme for children is to a large extent dependent on parents' involvement in such intervention (Okeke, 2003). Parents of both hearing and non-hearing schoolchildren are expected to actively complement their children in the learning and use of total communication. Their participation will not only demonstrate their support for inclusive education, it will also encourage the hearing and nonhearing schoolchildren to relate and work with one another. In addition to parents, all family members should also actively get involved in learning and using total communication as well as supporting inclusive education.

iii. Audiological Assessment/Amplification Technology: As a procedure, there should be periodic screening of all deaf pupils enrolled in inclusive schools to establish or revalidate their

hearing status. This will be very vital for enhancing their development of effective communication skills (Ekwama, 2003). Speech/auditory training, the use of hearing aids and other aural rehabilitative activities (which are also integral parts of total communication) are consequent on the audiological information obtained on the deaf schoolchildren. The more valid and accurate their audiological information is the more appropriate their speech training exercises and more satisfying their results would be.

Amplification systems combined with the oral rehabilitation programmes should also be well provided and utilized. Amplification systems again emphasize the intensification and upgrading of usable hearing levels in schoolchildren with hearing loss to the points at which they can be meaningfully used for communicative purposes (Fred and Freeman, 1981). The deaf schoolchildren can attain some acceptable competence in spoken language if their residual hearing is appropriately enhanced by amplification technology involving powerful and fixable hearing aids, FM systems, cochlear implant ad so on.

Amplification technology has made the pursuit of the auditory-oral education to be an accomplished intervention with many children with hearing loss (Adam, et. al, 1988). As a result, it has made possible greater verbal communication between hearing and non-hearing populace. Since usable speech development is the optimum wish for the deaf persons and their families (Mba, 1995) no efforts should therefore be spared on promoting the application of amplification technology to boost hearing potentials of persons with hearing loss.

iv. Service Delivery Team: Total communication practices require that necessary specialists should be engaged to facilitate its comprehensive application. Sign language interpreters, speech/language therapists, audiologists, amplification technologists and other must be sourced for to form a sound and full fledged interdisciplinary team which will dispense total communication in inclusive schools. These would complement the services of special and regular teachers as they serve as resource specialists and or support service providers. Their services will go along way in ensuring the success of inclusive practices with hearing and non-hearing school pupils.

CONCLUSION

The choice of an appropriate language of instruction in an inclusive class for hearing and nonhearing learners has been a great threat to the adoption of inclusive education. An inclusive class of hearing and nonhearing learners requires a communication mode which will be practical, impactful, understandable and inspiring for all parties in that class. There have been considerations for various communication media such as speech, speech reading, audition, fingerspelling, signing, total communication, gestures, drama, writing and drawing. Following a critical review of these media, total communication was favoured to be the most feasible communication mode for hearing and nonhearing mainstream class. This mode promises to facilitate meaningful classroom instructions and social interactions between hearing and nonhearing classmates.

As this paper focused on overcoming the classroom communication barrier in inclusive education, it is expected that it will encourage other concerned stakeholders to find means of eliminating various threats to inclusive education.

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