

**ACCOMMODATING LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS  
IN BOTSWANA: A CHALLENGE TO EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS  
AND SPECIAL EDUCATORS**

Matthews Adera Okumbe  
University of Botswana  
Dept. of Educational Foundations  
P/B UB 00702  
GABORONE  
BOTSWANA

Fax: +267-3185096  
Tel. +267-3552994 (Office)  
+267-3185401 (House)  
+267-71616589 (mobile)

Email: [Okumbem@mopipi.ub.bw](mailto:Okumbem@mopipi.ub.bw) or  
[okumbema@yahoo.com](mailto:okumbema@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:**

*The critical issue for special educators and educational psychologists is the effective accommodation modes for learners with special needs, in an inclusive classroom. Accommodation is done with the view of enhancing the performance of these learners and to help them meet individual needs of acquiring necessary input from lessons irrespective of their diverse backgrounds as they interact and socialize with their nondisabled peers. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of educational psychologists in the accommodation of special needs learners, particularly in the identification and recommendations that will assist special educators. Secondly, it will also discuss the roles of special educators in facilitating the acquisition of skills of special needs learners that will go a long way in having them included not only in school settings, but also in the world of work. It will throw light on the challenges posed to educational psychologists and special educators in helping these learners in inclusive school setting, in Botswana. Lastly, the paper will outline the best practices to accommodate these learners.*

## **Introduction**

The importance of accommodating learners with special educational needs in inclusive settings cannot be gainsaid. The inclusion of students with disabilities in assessment is deemed critical to improve the qualities of educational opportunities for these students and to provide meaningful and useful information about students' performance to the schools and communities that educate them (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morrison, 1997). An accommodation in education and especially special education refers to adjustments that make learners with special needs competent and proficient to take part in the regular classroom settings. According to IDEA (1997), accommodations are changes in course content, teaching strategies, standards, test presentation, location, timing, scheduling, expectations, student responses, environmental structuring and/or other attributes which provide access for a student with a disability to participate in a course/standard/test, which do not fundamentally alter or lower the standard or expectations of the course/standard/test. Modifications on the other hand refers to changes in course content, teaching strategies, standards, test presentation, location, timing, scheduling, expectations, student responses, environmental structuring and/or other attributes which provide access for a student with a disability to participate in a course/standard/test, which do fundamentally alter or lower the standard or expectations of the course/standard/test. The two terms are often used interchangeably, but they are not identical in terms of the teaching and learning outcomes. The expectation is that the moment those accommodations are made they do not get in the way of the standards of achievement. To this end, it can be said that accommodations offer alternative ways for learners to acquire information on what they have learned with the others. It is important to note that the difficulty level and the learner's expectations for achievement are no lowered due to accommodations, although there may be changes in teaching

materials used, testing materials, or even in the instructional environment. Educators often make accommodations for individual learners informally as they teach, but those with special needs may require more formally documenting the need for specific accommodation through an IEP (Freedman 2000).

### **Types of Special Educational Needs**

The following is a description of the types of special needs learners included in special education programmes in Botswana. These descriptions are derived from definitions formulated by professionals and experts in the fields of psychology and special education (Okumbe 2005)

Learning Disabilities are the most common forms of all the special educational needs involving the difficulty in organizing information received, remembering them, and expressing information and therefore impinge on a learner's basic function such as reading, writing, comprehension, and reasoning. There are many types of learning disabilities, which would include, dyslexia, which means inability to read; dyscalculia, inability in math reasoning; dysgraphia, that is, difficulty with syntax; as well as visual, and audio difficulties. Learners with learning disabilities generally experience difficulties in study skills, writing skills, oral skills, reading skills, math skills, and social skills. Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder (ADD/ADHD) may co-occur with learning disabilities whose features are marked by over-activity, distractibility, and/or impulsivity which in turn can interfere with the learner in trying to benefit from instruction (Kirk, Gallagher & Anastasiow, 2003). According to Mastropieri & Scruggs (2000), these students with learning disabilities can be taught effective learning strategies that will help them approach tasks more effectively.

*Visual Impairment* is the other forms of special need commonly found in regular classrooms which entail a deviation from the norm that may affect central vision, peripheral vision, night vision, colour perception, or general visual acuity. Its aetiology may be anatomical or functional, partial or total, temporary or permanent, reversible or progressive and vary greatly from one individual to the other. Some people with visual impairments can distinguish the presence of light and darkness, others see colours. Learners who have had no vision since birth may have difficulty understanding verbal descriptions of visual materials and limiting their abilities and or capabilities to instruction (Taylor, 2003). *Hearing Impairment* refers to a reduction in sensitivity to sounds which may be accompanied by some loss of adaptability in correctly interpreting auditory stimuli, even when amplified. Hearing impairments vary by degree of loss and pathology. Hearing loss may be permanent or transient, partial, or nearly total. The causes of hearing impairments may vary, but it could be caused by a variety of injuries or diseases, including congenital defects. Individuals with hearing impairments and deafness frequently have some capacity to hear but cannot discriminate clearly enough to rely upon speech for communication. Learners with hearing impairments may exhibit impaired language development which may affect comprehension of written materials, test questions, speaking, writing, and the ability to grasp abstract concepts; they may show dependence on visual cues, exhibit reluctance to ask for assistance, may misinterpret assignments, may have difficulty in participating in group discussions, exhibit inability to participate independently in class without an interpreter's assistance and show reduced comprehension for individuals with hearing aids due to environmental noise and social isolation (Kirk, Gallagher & Anastasiow 2003). *Mental Retardation* learners refers to those learners who develop at a below average rate and experience difficulty in learning and social adjustment. The

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1997), defines mental retardation as significantly sub average general intellectual functioning existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behaviour and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. The general intellectual functioning is typically measured by an intelligence test(s). The mentally retardation usually score seventy (70) or below on such tests. Adaptive behaviour on the other hand, refers to how an individual adjusts to everyday living situations. Difficulties may occur in learning, communication, social, academic, vocational, and independent living skills (McLoughlin & Lewis, 1994). In order to Enhance of Performance of Special Needs Learners accommodations can be used appropriately to broaden the extent of possibilities and learner potentials. It will help the learner to improve in their self-esteem and self-concept by considering their strengths as well as the weaknesses. Teachers as well as learners can play a role in the changes of instructional methods with the purpose of achieving the same intended instructional outcomes recommended in general curriculum. Accommodations include but not limited to incorporating dissimilar types of teaching devices and techniques, as audiotape, technology, graphic organizers, Perkins Brailers and pictorial representation. Additionally, changing the amount of input, time frame for learning, and levels of support for individual learner's needs are also some types of accommodations.

*Role of educational psychologists in identification, recommendations to assist sped teachers*

Educational psychologists apply scientific principles of teaching, learning and behaviour to help maximise the social, emotional and educational growth and development of children and young people. In other words educational psychologists are applied psychologists in the field of education. As such they are better placed to

offer advice and/or consultation on special educational needs in children and young people. They use the data collected by schools as part of their assessment process, which includes the use of observational techniques, questionnaires and psychometric testing and clinical interviews. Thereafter, educational psychologists analyse and interpret the outcomes by giving the impressions about assessment, which impression or opinion can now be used to inform work in school or the world of work. In short educational psychologists contribute to raising standards in the learner and school performance in order to improve and promote inclusion in classroom settings and by extension, social inclusion

*How special educators participate in facilitating acquisition of skills to special needs learners*

Depending on the disability, special educators can use various techniques in order to promote learning in an inclusive setting. Individualized instruction, problem-solving assignments, and small group work are some of the teaching methods that special educators may apply given the magnitude of the disability. Special educators, among other roles, help in the development of an Individualized Education Programme (IEP) for each special needs learner. This individualized Education Programme consists of sets of individualized goals for each learner and is usually tailored to the specific needs and capability of the learner. In order for the programme to be seen to be appropriate it is important that it should include a transition plan which outlines specific steps for learners with special needs. Upon its preparation with consent of the parents and regular teachers, the Individualized Education Programme (IEP) can be reviewed with the learner's parents, school administrators, as well as the significant others. Additionally special educators may teach only special needs others learners in their own classrooms and also resource educators who may offer individualized help to

learners in regular classrooms as well as assisting special needs learners in resource rooms which are usually separate from their general education classroom and meant to cater to only for the special needs learners. Special educators ought to work with parents in order to show them techniques and activities designed to stimulate their children which goes along way in promoting cognitive growth and developing various skills in learners. Working closely with parents, guardian or care-givers also means that that they can be informed of the progress and suggested techniques with the aim to promote learning right from the home front (Okumbe & Seeco 2006). Like educational psychologists, special educators also contribute to raising standards in the learner and school performance in order to improve and promote inclusion in classroom settings and by extension, social inclusion.

*Challenges facing Educational Psychologists and Special Educators regarding Special Educational Needs Learners*

In spite of the vast duties that these professionals are involved in, the biggest challenge facing implementation of inclusive education in Botswana is that of changing teachers' attitudes and mindset regarding special needs learners and to train them to conceptualize and effectively implement inclusive practices. There is also lack of public education to create awareness to those parents or guardians of special needs learners so that they can have a positive attitude towards assisting and helping these learners to develop their full potentials. In Botswana, there is still some stigma with regard to learners with special needs. Some people believe it is a curse on the parents, thus the disability, to the extent that people end up keeping these children at homes rather than taking them to schools. In the same vein, educational professionals and other stakeholders have been slow to adopt and support the concept of diversity, thereby making implementation difficult (Okumbe and Malatsi 2005). The other

challenge relates to the centralization of structures. All the cases for assessment are referred to the central resource centre (CRC), which is the only assessing authority in the country. Lack of well equipped and adequately trained personnel is another challenge posed by implementing inclusive system of education. The teachers are in short supply because of lack of training in areas of specialization. Absence of a curriculum which is inclusive in nature is yet another challenge to the specialist in the process of accommodating special needs learners. Perhaps the most silent and ominous challenge is that of the HIV/AIDS pandemic some learners come to the learning environment either as affected or infected with HIV and Aids, besides having special educational needs. This brings the problem of multiplicity of needs to be taken care of by the regular teacher who may have little or no knowledge on how to deal with these diverse needs (Okumbe & Malatsi 2005). In terms of their accommodations, there is no rule or regulation that monitors whether they need or do not need accommodations. However, private school in Botswana do assist learners by referring them to educational psychologists for assessment and ultimately to the special educators in order for them to get accommodations. These professionals then prepare a comprehensive report detailing the learner's strengths and weaknesses which are the passed on to the examining body. This body then makes the final decision as to whether accommodations will be granted or not.

*Best practices to accommodate these learners.*

Since the Government of Botswana embraces the practice of inclusive educational systems, the following strategies are therefore beneficial to the achievement of this objective.



- Early identification – there is need to identify these learners in time so that they can be assessed with a view to helping them achieve to their potentials
- Collaboration and liaison between the professionals and Ministry officials – this will help with creating awareness about accommodations and its benefits to the special educational needs learners and also to keep a profile of those learners who have received and those who require the accommodation services.
- Resource rooms and resource room personnel – there is also need for resource rooms in inclusive school settings where those learners who have been given accommodations can use, especially visually impaired and the intellectually retarded as they will take longer time using the teaching and learning aids.
- There should be an inclusive curriculum with prominence on strengths but which accommodates the needs of all learners from disadvantaged and minority groups and cultures.

## **Conclusion**

As stated earlier, the critical issue for special educators and educational psychologists is the effective accommodation modes for learners with special needs, in an inclusive setting. It is against this backdrop that special needs learners are faced with a lot of challenges with the upshot that their prevention and remediation requires appropriate, effective and efficient intervention in order to improve the conditions of teaching and learners for these learners with diverse backgrounds which will go a long way in meeting their potentials not only in schools settings but also in the world of work.

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