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UNIVERSITY FOR ALL: INCLUDING SPECIAL NEEDS LEARNERS IN EDUCATION

Abstract

This work investigates the incorporation of inclusive education to promote learners' participation in general, and learners' with special needs in particular, in the classroom context. Its objective seeks to understand the extent to which inclusive pedagogy is used to raise learners' engagement in the classroom, especially those who have special needs. In this prospect, a questionnaire is administered to twenty teachers at the University of Tiaret-English section to undertake this study. The findings reveal the failure to integrate an inclusive approach at university due to the deficiency of a special training in the field to help this category of learners prosper in their learning.

Keywords: inclusive education, learners' engagement, special needs, training.

1.   Introduction

Teaching is a very hard mission especially with learners who belong to the 21st century. This difficulty cannot be equally compared to impaired pupils. Unlike learners without disabilities, disabled learners are strong-willed to learn and have the right to achieve better and have a successful career. This category of learners has special needs which require the educators to set their learning needs and accommodate their teaching styles accordingly in order to integrate them successfully in the learning process. In this perspective, our main objective in this work is to assess the importance of integrating an inclusive approach in our classrooms to meet the different needs of learners. As a research instrument, a questionnaire is administered to twenty teachers at university. The findings reveal that all teachers faced difficulties in teaching students with special needs as they have explained the difficulties of engaging them with learners without disabilities arguing that the best way to increase their performance is their incorporation in special classes, which offer a comfortable climate and constructive approaches in teaching.

2.   Literature Review

"Les établissements d'enseignement spécialisé ou les classes séparées ont été considérés comme une bonne alternative à d'autres formes d'éducation ou même à aucune éducation » (UNICEF, 2014, p. 20)

"People with disabilities often have unique insights about their disability and their situation. In formulating and implementing policies, laws, and services, people with disabilities should be consulted and actively involved… Supported decision-making may be necessary to enable some individuals to communicate their needs and choices. " (World Health Organization, 2011, p. 265- 266)

"I can't say that my disability has helped my work, but it has allowed me to concentrate on research without having to lecture or sit on boring committees." Stephen Hawking

3. Inclusive education

Scholars like Corps, Ceralli & Boisseau (2012) argue that any classroom is diverse in terms of social or cultural background, and the integration of students is a step to foster their engagement and performance respectively. In some cases, teachers could face disabled learners in the classroom, thus the treatment is different in comparison to students without disabilities and the teaching methods that are usually used with normal learners could not suit the learners with special needs simply because a special need entails a specific approach. So, inclusive education is a process which aims to encourage students to participate, be engaged in their learning and reduce exclusion as well, in a way that helps to respond to the different needs of all learners. Further, it considers the individuals' teaching and learning styles, preferences and social or personal needs. In this regard, Soriano, Watkins & Ebersold (2017) claim that inclusive education *"builds on innovative approaches and practices developed for the education of people with disabilities to design effective and equitable education systems for all learners in a lifelong perspective covering all aspects of education." (p. 07)*

We cannot disregard the co-existence of both genders, i. e., males and females in the classroom who could be disabled (Rousso, n. d). Thus, the gender-inclusive approach should focus not only on girls' education but disabled boys and normal learners. However, the obstacles to learning for disabled girls are shaped through discrimination and negative attitudes as Kasambula (2015) articulates *"women with disabilities may be particularly at risk due to stigmas associated with both disability and gender inequality"* (p. 25); this does not mean focus should be on working with female pupils alone. Notably, the approach of inclusion promotes the concept of partnerships that should be constructed in order to help all learners, teachers and parents, regardless of the kind of disability, to promote success at school (Corps et al, 2012).

Actually, disability is one of the permanent or lifelong factors (Thakran, 2015; Truesdale & Brown, 2017) that could cause an educational disadvantage and school exclusion, as it creates *"the largest single group of girls and boys who remain out of school."*(Howgego, Miles & Myers, 2014, p. 05). For this reason, inclusive learning aims, not only to make learners accessible to learning, but rather attempts to boost classroom engagement of all learners regardless of their disability type. It proposes a learner-centered approach to fit the needs of this disabled category as it highlights the disadvantages of school organization, curriculum planning, and varying assessment forms (Thomas and May, 2010), besides this, a special training is provided to teachers who will be in charge of teaching these learners and will be able to raise their classroom achievement as Frangieh, Mérini & Thomazet (2014) point out *"les enseignants spécialisés en formation accordent à la dimension collective de leur travail. Cette forme de travail relativement nouvelle engendre des dilemmes au sein même de leur métier et des tensions inter-métiers"* (p. 34). The unawareness of instructors towards their students' capabilities causes teachers to create a teaching environment based mainly on the drafting of the general learning standards (Mohsin & Zakaria, 2017). Hence, inclusive learning is not limited to the transmission of the content but, rather, how to have an inspiring career and how to be a citizen *"Inclusive learning moves beyond providing individuals with support to fundamental changes being made to the way teaching and learning is organized"* (Howgego, Miles & Myers, 2014, p. 05)

Likewise, Inclusive education is associated to social inclusion and peoples' capacity to be perceived as citizens and members of the speech community (Novo-Corti1, 2010). It involves the different skills enabling individuals to have a successful career, be self-actualized, and assume responsibilities, be ethno relative and acknowledge cultural diversity. In this regard, diversity is valued within the inclusive framework as strength, rather than a weakness, as learners work together collaboratively, exchange ideas and learn from each other. (Spratt & Florian, 2013; Soriano, Watkins & Ebersold, 2017)

4. Learning disabilities

First, learning disabilities vary from one person to another, hence their needs are distinct. Their incorporation in the classroom with able learners seems hard to be achieved and their inclusion requires special procedures and a rigid program (Appert et al., 2018) It is noteworthy to mention that in any classroom, we have learners who are excluded due to shyness, fear, anxiety and so forth and others who are always included because, from a didactic point of view, they are active learners. One way to incorporate all pupils in the classroom is to take into consideration their different learning styles and preferences, i. e., auditory, visual or kinesthetic, because every individual has his/her own preferred channel of perception (Boneva & Mihova, 2012). Learners with disabilities are as diverse as their non-disabled peers, but the case is different (Wapling, 2016). In fact, teachers who are specialized or have a specific training in how to deal with students with special needs are more qualified to teach disabled learners and are then apt to adjust their teaching styles accordingly (Frangieh, Mérini & Thomazet, 2014). Actually, a learning disability is detected when individuals face difficulties in the four language skills as reading, writing, listening, and speaking or reasoning like all what is mathematical. Learners with disabilities have troubles in processing accurately or taking information through their senses to the brain, these difficulties make them different and always late in understanding the instructions, answering questions or correcting the classroom assignments (Thakran, 2015).

One way to test if someone is experiencing some form of disability or not is the IQ test; the IQ disability measurement are "50 -70: mild learning disability 35 – 50: moderate learning disability 20 – 35: severe learning disability; below 20 profound learning disability" (Thakran, 2015, p. 149). In fact, Ebo (2016) has classified many forms of learning disabilities like Dyslexia (reading disability); Dysgraphia (writing disability); Autism (difficulty in communicating and learning basic skills);and dyscalculia (difficulties with numbers); these previously mentioned disabilities are forms of neurological or mental problems; they need not only time to deal with them but patience, persistence, and specific teaching techniques.

Indeed, learning disabilities could be mental or physical; people who have a physical disability encounter many difficulties among them going to school or university. On the contrary, people who are mentally disabled find difficulties to interact with people, process information and so forth. As summarized by the learning guide which is published by Careerforce (2017), a disability should not refer to what people are, but rather it is a weakness or an impairment that prevents people from performing necessary tasks. According to World Health Organization (2011), these impairments are as follows:

a- Physical: weakness in body functions.

b- Sensory: deaf-mute, blindness.

c-Neurological: associated to the nervous system, like Epilepsy, Apraxia, Agnosia.

d- Psychiatric (mental): communication disorders, autism.

e- Cognitive, like limitations of memory, brain processes, and learning abilities.

5. Inclusive learning and teaching

Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education refer to the ways in which pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all (Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall, 2009). It embraces a view of the individual and individual differences as the source of diversity that can enrich the lives and learning of others (Appert et al., 2018). In fact, it does not disregard the differences that co-exist between students but instead it *"seeks to accommodate them by extending what is ordinarily available to all rather than by differentiating for some"* (Florian,

2015, p. 13). In order to promote and incorporate all students along with learners with special needs Thomas and May (2010) suggest that curriculum is the first step. As clarified in figure 1 below, inclusive learning and teaching are achieved through designing an appropriate curriculum which proposes how to assess learners with special needs, how to integrate them successfully in the classroom, and how to encourage them to be engaged and thus achieve equity among students.
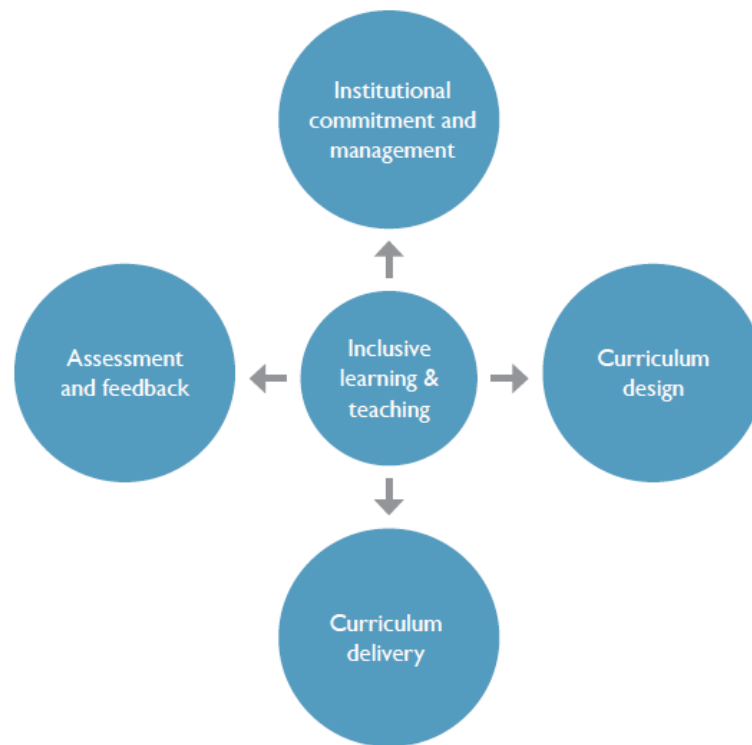

Figure 1.

Elements of Inclusive learning and teaching (Thomas & May, 2010, p. 6)

Thomas and May (2010) state that curriculum design will be inclusive when it takes into consideration the diversity of the individuals, the expected learning outcomes, the content of the text books, besides the assessment procedures. Likewise, the planning of how to integrate all learners as well as taking into account learners heterogeneity, their social classes, previous experiences, interests and future expectation are also qualities of a well-established curriculum.

E-leaning is an important criterion which helps raising pupils' participation, because regardless of the learning needs of individuals, they are quite influenced by technological devices and there is a great possibility that they can learn through ICTs better than a traditional classroom (Khan & Jumani, 2012; Belaid & Sarnou, 2018). Forman et al., (2002), as cited in Thomas and May, recite that e-learning *"can act as a catalyst for educational diversity, freedom to learn and equality of opportunity, and technology can make learning available to students away from the institution"* (p. 10) Second, institutions must take into account the appropriate delivery of the curriculum and the integration of learners with it. In fact, adaptable and feasible teaching strategies that permit learners to apply what they are learning to serve their social needs will definitely engage a wider range of individuals. Third, how to assess learners with special needs is quite important in the whole process. Assessment, in this context, refers to the planning of effective assessment techniques that motivate all students to expound what they know, and reflect on what they learn. Transparency, objectivity and fairness are all necessary qualities of a valid assessment. In a nutshell, the institutions

should reveal their commitments and interests in incorporating inclusive teaching which is obviously mirrored through their decision making, policies, and systems.

Similarly, Appert et al., (2018) assume that in order to take into account the different backgrounds, values identities and even experiences of learners, there must be a particular classroom climate that welcomes all learners to participate in their learning. This classroom climate creates an inclusive atmosphere for all. Ambrose et al (2010), as qtd in Appert el al (2018), have defined the classroom climate as *"the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which our students learn"* (p. 12) this climate incorporates learners' communication among one another, teacher-student interaction, the content to be transmitted in the classroom, the tone of the class, the teaching materials used to deliver the lesson besides the way stereotypes are controlled. This after mentioned climate would work along with a learner centric approach whereby students are motivated to participate and be innovative, Davis (2009), as qtd in Appert el al (2018), states, "*the ideal classroom environment is one in which all students feel as if they belong and as if their points of view matter*" (p. 12). The creation of a comfortable classroom climate helps learners perceive that they own learning and are responsible for it; this makes them believe in their capacities.

6. Methodology

6.1. Context

Teaching students at university seems easy, but when it comes to teaching learners with special needs, things will be different especially in amphitheatres whereby the number of students is large. For this, we have chosen the teachers of the University of Ibn Khaldoun - Tiaret-particularly in the English section to undertake this research work and because it is a recent field, the number of teachers in this institution is quite limited.

6.2. Participants

Our sample is comprised of twenty teachers from the section of English, in Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret. Their experience ranges between novice and experienced teachers; besides this the majority of teachers has a Magister Degree. They have a long experience in teaching at the secondary schools and university; a considerable period which enables them to be familiar with the topic discussed in this current investigation.

6.3. Procedures

In order to undertake this work, we handed a questionnaire to our sample; it is comprised of ten questions; a mixture of open ended and close ended questions. The main objective behind these pre-selected questions is to be acquainted with how teachers handled a situation whereby students with disabilities are in the same classroom along with students without disabilities, and how they were able to assess and teach them regardless of their disability type.

7. Results and Discussion

From the data that we have collected, the majority of teachers articulate that they have had an experience in teaching learners with disabilities from both types physical or mental disability along with learners without disabilities. Apparently, the majority of our sample argues that they taught learners who are physically disabled more than those who have mental problems claiming that mentally disabled learners find difficulties to study at university because they need special classrooms, qualified teachers with a specific training and a different learning atmosphere. Figure 2 below clarifies that 70 % of our sample has taught students who have a certain physical problem whereas 30% has experiences with mentally disabled students.
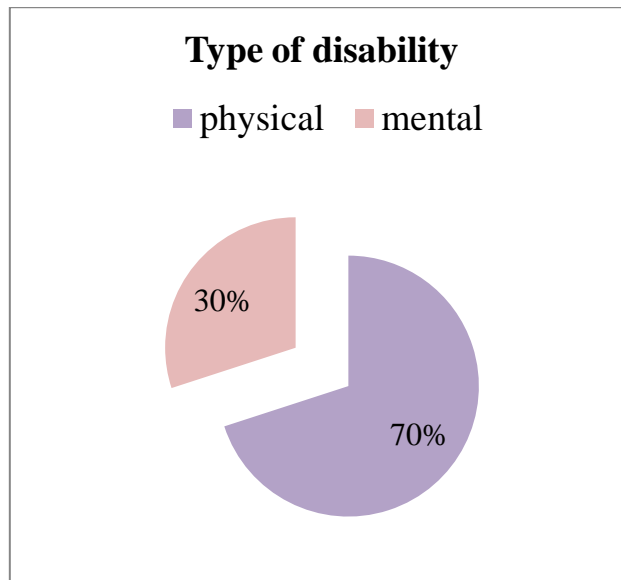
Figure 2:

The most frequent disability taught by teachers

Second, it is noteworthy to mention that, according to the teachers' responses, instructors try hard to make students feel they are not disabled; though their answers vary from one teacher no another. Some claim that they do their best to consider these learners as normal students. However, they care a lot about them and are very sensitive mainly by providing them with understanding and advice if needed, giving them chances to participate in the classroom and vary activities to give them equal opportunities with their mates, and other techniques like writing on the board, providing handouts, using body language, visualizing what is invisible for them through detailed or extra imagination explanations and supporting them emotionally. Others disregard showing compassion and empathy towards this category stating that compassion makes them feel that they are different from their counterparts. Some teachers declare that it depends mostly on the type of disability; if it is mental, it is hard to integrate them, and thus they need special classes. If they have a physical problem things are better because they are not a source of concern the way mentally disabled learners are, because this type is more self confident, have self-esteem and actually their performance is better in the classroom; this type could be encouraged and supported. Though physically disabled learners are serious and assume their responsibility towards their learning; they are still isolated in the classroom most of the time. In this perspective, teachers affirm that they attempt to incorporate them in group works with their classmates, accept their answers even if they are wrong, increase their marks if they have bad ones and do not punish them if they misbehave.

Third, enabled students' integration in the learning process could be achieved by using ICTs, or through tackling real life problems which would trigger their thinking. When it comes to the integration of learners with disabilities, 80 % of teachers argues that it is very hard to teach a disabled learner with enabled learners especially if the type of disability is mental. 5 % of our sample states that is easy to teach learners with disabilities especially if their number is limited to one or two in the classroom. Whereas, 15% opts for the undetermined choice because probably they did not experience teaching learners with special needs, or probably they have no background information in how to make a plan to incorporate them in the classroom. Table 1 and figure 3 below indicate the extent to which learners with special needs could be integrated in the classroom from the perspective of our selected population.

Table 1:

Disabled students' incorporation in the classroom

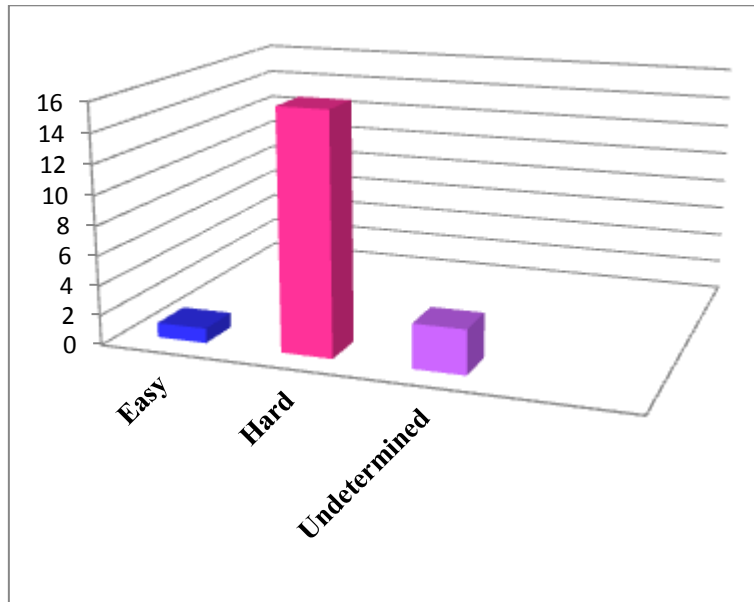| Options	Easy	Hard	Undetermined
Number	1	16	3
Percentage	5%	80%	15%

Figure 3:

The integration of learners with special needs

As long as the integration of learners with special needs is raised, though it is difficult, all the instructors assert that it is very hard to integrate a learner who has a mental disability claiming that those who have a physical handicap could face difficulties to come to school or university, but they are like enabled students; they make research participate when needed and perform as a nondisabled student in final exams. Conversely, students who have a mental disability are hard to be dealt with or treated in comparison to enabled learners, hence their integration in the classroom seems hard and sometimes impossible. Table 2 and figure 3 below refer to the degree of difficulty among teachers in integrating physical and mental disabilities.

Table 2:

The most complicated type of disability to be inserted in classrooms

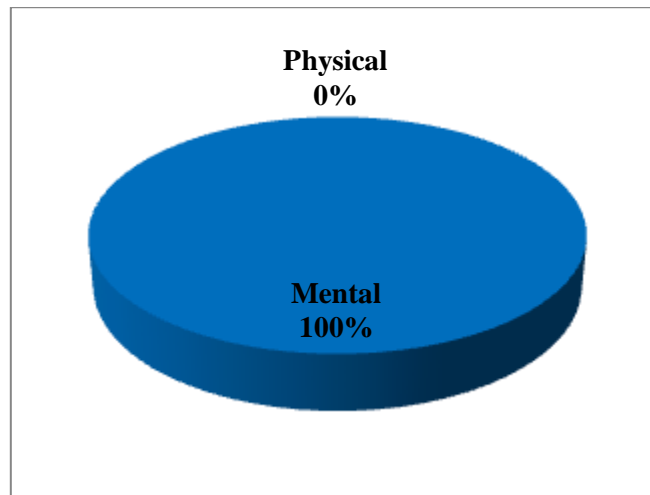| Options	Number	Percentage
Physical	00	0 %
Mental	20	100 %
Total	**20**	**100 %**

Figure 4:

The hardest disability to be incorporated

Fourth, as long as assessment is part of the learning process, evaluating learners with special needs is quite important. Actually, according on our sample experiences, assessment procedures vary from one teacher to another. Some educators claim that all students are assessed similarly; it is true that they may exhibit a sort of a difference, yet when it comes to performance, learners with disabilities perform better than non-disabled ones. Others specify that it depends on the type of disability; if it prevents the learners from participating in oral tasks they will take into consideration their written performance only and vice versa. Teachers assume that evaluation, if based on each student efforts, they help them in the cc (continuous assessment) mark, but when it comes to the exam, students perform poorly and the mark is unchangeable. Some teachers point out that continuous feedback, extra time, simple and short instructions are ways of assessing learners besides their tolerance regarding some specific kind of mistakes. Others argue that when it comes to assessing them, it is a challenging task but generally instructors accept someone to write for them when he/she is available or sometimes they are flexible and accept to assess learners orally, in case the disability requires this technique.

Fifth, we were very curious to understand what to do to successfully teach learners with special needs and raise their classroom participation or performance at university, or at least integrate them with normal students. The selected sample for this investigative work suggested the following:

• Include the socio-effective learning strategies through collaborative works with their peers.
• It is very helpful to skillfully engage differently abled learners in tasks or texts that are related to their disability and make them talk about it openly in the class. This strategy may help both teachers and students to cope with this issue.
• The use of self-reflect or progress journal or report for this type of learners is effective to observe their improvement in the classroom.
• Develop a cultural institution that takes into account the existence of such category.
• Teachers must concentrate on the areas of strength of each disabled person in order to make them feel that they are gifted.
• Developing a responsive attitude that can fix similar issues at university.
• Accepting special differences and embracing them as a part of human diversity and source of pride for the university in which every single member has the opportunity to learn and develop his/her potential.
• As long as they are together with their counterparts who do not have disabilities, they will not feel comfortable. It is better to have their own classrooms that are equipped with what suit

their physical disabilities, where they will be with their mates (though just 2 or 3 per room), but what really matters is that they should feel at ease and with no embarrassment or the feel of empathy.

- Students with disabilities must be provided with emotional support and directly be integrated with normal students.
- Must be given full freedom to express their feelings with their colleagues.
- Give them special attention from all teachers; follow them and expose them to specialized doctors and psychologists because it is hard to determine their real level and their needs. Integrating them in group works and assigning them with tasks and missions according to their abilities.
- Teachers should interact verbally and non-verbally to communicate with students their attitudes about participation.
- Create an environment in which all participants have the opportunity to learn and explore ideas in depth, not to have every student participate in the same way.
- Create learning conditions that enable students of various learning preferences to contribute, through encouragement and equal chances to speak.
- Classroom appropriate arrangement.
- Learn and use students' names.
- Integrate short lectures into the lesson plan to introduce concepts, clarify and order ideas, and help students make connections.
- Give all students time to think before they respond. Not all students are active in their learning.
- Provide special classes for them to separate them from normal learners.
- Listen fully to the students' questions and answers; avoid interrupting.
- Promote turn taking among learners.
- Collect information about disabled people to help planning and understanding what disabled people want and need and this is mainly proposed by Careerforce (2017).

8. Conclusion

While learner-centred pedagogies along with collaborative learning are generally recognized as effective in motivating students from different backgrounds and be integrated in higher education, they are not fully engaged in their own learning. As teachers, we want our courses and classes to be appropriate learning spaces for all our learners. But how do we make that possible? Inclusive pedagogy is a method of teaching in which instructors and classmates work together to create a supportive environment that gives every learner equal access to learning. Actually, inclusive classrooms work to ensure that teacher-learner participation enhances partnership and mutual understanding. From the findings of this investigative study, we deduced that the classroom diversity is not taken into consideration because of the absence of a specialized training in dealing with the different learning disabilities with all its types. In a nutshell, it is high time to consider the learners with special needs as a gift in which they are a source of innovation, creativity, and self-assurance.

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