AHS4118S Monitoring Disability in Society Postgraduate Diploma Course.
Teaching and Learning Brief: Integrated Dance as a Tool for Disability Inclusion

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1. Executive Summary

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognizes the right of all children with disabilities both to be included in the general education systems and to receive the individual support they need. Systemic change to remove barriers and provide reasonable accommodation and support services is required to ensure that children with disabilities are not excluded from mainstream educational opportunities (UNCRPD 2007). Thus, inclusive education is critical in ensuring that education is within the reach of persons with a disability. This requires changes in school infrastructure and investment in better teacher training. Education is a continuing process from cradle to grave and therefore, needs to engage in disabilities issues throughout. Interactive teaching and learning as part of this process should acknowledge the artistic potential that each and every person possesses. To acquire knowledge is not just based on numeric competence and literacy. Arts Education is vital to ensure a holistic development of a learners understanding of the world and of his/her abilities. Disability is not only a health issue.

It is a societal mind-set that needs to change. Dance is one of the tools in Arts Education which can be used to create a non-threatening environment for people with and without disabilities to learn together. Whenever people dance, they are communicating. This can be a thought, an idea or a story, or simply the ethos, the distinctive spirit of their being. Dance focuses on preparing the body as an instrument of expression. It is important for you to understand exactly how your body works in action and to ensure that you use it safely, effectively and with meaning. Therefore, dance studies should form part of an inclusive teaching and learning curriculum.

2. Unmute: An integrated Dance Company

This Dance Company is currently using wheelchair, deaf and non-disabled dancers to teach at special needs and mainstream schools to explore what they would like to un-mute: feelings, perceptions, social norms, expectations and what society perceives persons with disabilities should be. They use sign language as the source of movement vocabulary. Unmute is the only Dance Company comprised of both able bodied and disabled dancers. Unmute strives to be a voice for the disability sector through the advancement of integrated arts.

The core of Unmute Dance Company is to build awareness through inclusion of people with disabilities in the mainstream of the performing arts. The values of this particular discipline are:
• It gives empowerment both to the disabled and able dancers to change audience perceptions of disability and the dance form itself
• It gives a more positive visibility to persons with disabilities
• It pushes the boundaries relating to physical challenges
• It creates a shift in the mind of the spectator, from a particular dance experience to a broader, empowered cultural understanding.
• It is about young people working together as a team, irrespective of their varying challenges.

2. Inclusive Dance Education: Key Disability Issues

Dance is a viable and enjoyable activity – and potential career – for young people with disabilities, yet they face several barriers to participation and training (Aujla & Redding 2013). Attitudinal barriers can come from disabled young dancers themselves, from peers, parents and caregivers, teachers, companies, audiences and critics. The performing arts are not typically perceived as a viable or appropriate activity (never mind career) for people with disabilities (Delin2002). Discouragement may come from parents or carers who lack knowledge and understanding of the thriving disability art scene and may wish to protect their children from potential disappointment (Delin 2002; Whatley 2008).

Persons with disabilities often suffer long-term stigmatisation, which results in feelings of inadequacy, reduced aspiration, isolation, and various skills deficits. Access to Education is conditioned by the type of disability. A wheelchair user’s experience is totally different from that of a learner who is hard of hearing or a learner who is blind. Negative stereotyping also affects the daily life of learners with disabilities and leads to a number of unpleasant and unfavourable situations, such as name calling, and being regarded as slow learners. Special Needs School teachers overall see themselves as caregivers and often do not transmit knowledge and experiences. This results in low self-esteem and heightens their feelings of inadequacy with respect to their true capabilities.

3. Positive Critical Outcomes

The most important learning outcomes, as demonstrated by Unmute through their performances to young learners, are the following:

• Identify and solve problems and make decisions using critical and creative thinking
• Develop an effective work ethic with others as part of a team, group, organisation and community
• Organise and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively
• Collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information
• Communicate effectively using visual, symbolic and for language skills in various modes.
• Use Arts Education to effectively and critically show responsibility towards the environment and the health of others.

The current assessment strategies used by policy maker’s needs realignment. Assessment implies measurement and in the case of the arts should be qualitative rather than quantitative. Process lends rather than product.

Although Unmute has experienced various challenges in advancing the power of dance education, this Company has changed the landscape of how dance can inspire, encourage learners, teachers and management to break down barriers between people of different physicality’s. Creating dance also contributes to the development of confidence. Learners experienced through hard work and determination they can break down personal limits even if they are disabled.

It is important that integrated dance be introduced to learners at an early stage of their educational careers and that disability studies and awareness become part of the curriculum. Early provision is necessary so that young children become familiar with dance from a young age and subsequently, find it easier to access mainstream options (Schwyzer, 2005). Ongoing training is to be provided for teachers as part of their teachers training and not just teachers going into special needs education.

4. Conclusion

Barriers to learning and development should be addressed in our classrooms and schools. First, at this stage, learners with disabilities are currently in special needs schools and most of them are go to Grade 10. Second, we cannot ignore the current crisis in education, where teachers have been subjected to crowded classrooms, criminal behaviour and changes to the curriculum every six months. The fact that we have existing barriers to learning in mainstream classrooms should alert us to the fact that when attempting Inclusive classrooms we will have areas where we need to focus a safe learning environment not only for the special needs learner, but also for fellow classmates. These can be as simple as: disability as a barrier, language and communication, lack of parental recognition and involvement, socio-economic barriers and attitudes.

The important issue in addressing the needs of Inclusive Education is how to break the negative mind-sets of the general public, teachers and learners who are placed in this environment. Emphasis should be on equipping the educator to teach in such an environment through Higher Education Institutions. It is important to emphasize that a curriculum for persons with disabilities can be no different from a curriculum for learners with no disabilities.

However, the daily challenges to access education must be a priority. Teacher Training and School Management Courses must include courses on disability awareness and on how to use assertive devices as an education tool to enhance effective learning in the classroom. The training received should also focus on
methodologies for how to bring lessons across to the learners and to enhance a greater understanding to students who do not have special needs.

Accessibility is important in terms of adding to the safe environment of the special needs learners but also awareness by other students that this as a normal space for what is accepted as the norm within general public spaces. Thus, before advocating for inclusive education, we need to identify, gaps in education, location (rural or urban), gender, race, income level, and the type of disability. What can be learned from Arts Education with reference to inclusive education is it’s holistic approach with its whole ethos being the education of mind, body and soul.

5. References


6. Acknowledgements

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