Challenges and Recommendations Regarding Supporting All Learners at University Level

Kenyatta University and Syracuse University*: Africa-U.S. Higher Education Initiative Partnership

Building Capacity Through Quality Teacher Preparation

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Due to educational reforms in many places around the world, teachers are seeing an increasing diversity in the needs of learners in their classrooms. Many countries have enacted legislation that provides access for all students to learning in general education classrooms. International conferences, such as the 2010 Inclusive and Supportive Education Congress (ISEC) that was held in Belfast, Ireland, focus attention on the needs of all students and the importance of learners being included in "age-appropriate classes" (Smith & Tyler, 2011).

A big challenge in meeting the needs of all learners is having teachers who are knowledgeable about and able to support all learners. This challenge has implications for all teacher educators who work in preparing pre-service teachers and in providing professional development for in-service teachers.

Workshop Recommendations
As part of the KU-SU partnership activities, we conducted a survey of all of the Department of Educational Communication and Technology faculty members to gain baseline data on a variety of teaching and learning issues; included among these issues were class size, supporting all learners, and integrating technology into teaching. Twenty-one faculty members completed the survey and more than 70% of these respondents indicated that they would like professional development on how to support all learners and to be able to prepare teachers to support all learners.

Additionally, another one of our project activities was to collect data from Kenyatta University graduate teachers, both novice (0-3 years of teaching experience) and experienced (more than 3 years of teaching experience). We collected data from 50 novice and 50 experienced teachers. Sizeable percentages—36% of novice teachers and 68% of experienced teachers—answered "No" to the question "Did the KU Teacher Education program prepare you adequately to teach learners with different needs (e.g., gifted, slow learners, visually challenged, physically challenged, mentally challenged, emotionally disturbed, difficult circumstances)?" Due to the response of faculty members and graduate teachers through the questionnaire data related to this issue, we chose to address supporting all learners for our second workshop sponsored through the Kenyatta University-Syracuse University partnership.

The workshop was held at the Kenyatta University Conference Centre on November 24, 2011. We discussed what contributes to differences in learners, strategies for identifying learner needs, strategies to support all learners, preparing teachers to support all learners, and in what units we will strengthen the content to prepare teachers to support all learners.

The recommendations arising from this workshop establish a clear need to address issues related to supporting all learners in our classes and preparing teachers to support all learners.

- ***Recommendation #1:*** The Department of Educational Communication and Technology should have a unit that would be taken by all pre-service teachers to prepare them to support all learners.

- ***Recommendation #2:*** Each subject methods unit should include a topic on how to support all learners and give teachers practice in planning lessons that differentiate instruction.

- ***Recommendation #3:*** Some of the ECT 202 content should be put in an online format, and since the topic of learning about diversity among learners is already in the course outline for ECT 202, we should increase the amount of time spent on it and reduce time on other topics, such as chalkboard work.

- ***Recommendation #4:*** Staff members should continue to participate in professional development related to supporting all learners and preparing teachers to support all learners. Staff members of the department need support for professional growth and development to stay abreast of best practices in teacher education, both for their own teaching and to be able to prepare teachers with these skills.

- ***Recommendation #5:*** The Office of the Dean of Students should provide information to all department chairs concerning all students with special needs.

References
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Note that an excellent source of free, online resources to use in preparing teachers to support all learners is available at the IRIS Center for Training Enhancements— http://www.iriscenter.com.