Understanding and Promoting The Student Support Program in International School, Doha, Qatar

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Abstract. This paper explores the facilitation of students who need support during the school hours and explores how this process might impact on overall inclusion of additional educational support needs (AESN) in a school. The main aim of this study is to find out effective teaching strategies of main stream teachers to teach AESN students through implementation of student support program. The rationale for this study is searching good strategies as the common perception of teachers is that AESN students cannot learn in inclusive setup through implementation of student support program. This is a qualitative study that was conducted in a school in Qatar. This is a case study of Student Support Program (SSP) implementation involving Classroom observations, senior management team (SMT) meeting and parents meeting as tools to collect the key information. The findings of the study show that SSP is an essential and significant program for AESN students at the observer's school. For implementation of SSP program, the Student Support Team used one-to-one teaching strategies, structured teaching, Visual Learning strategies, Differentiated Teaching strategy and adaptive teaching strategies. The findings of this study could possibly motivate mainstream teachers in inclusive education in Qatar to teach AESN students.

Keywords: Additional Educational Support Needs (AESN), Student Support Program (SSP); Student Support Team (SST); Special Education Needs (SEN); Academic Intervention Plan (AIP); Gifted and talented Program (GTP); English as a Second Language (ESL); teaching strategies; main stream; inclusive education.

1 Introduction

The beginning of this study lays in the concern that often full participation of students, who need support, in the inclusive classrooms does not always happen. During my learning and teaching practice in Qatar, I found that many teachers have a lot to say on what works for inclusion and what does not. However, they accept that it is a challenge to teach additional educational support needs (AESN) students during teaching a general lesson. Therefore, observer engaged herself to develop a concrete structure of Student Support Program (SSP) for direct promotion of inclusive education.

In Qatar, many AESN students are not in a situation to cope in mainstream school, due to the insufficiency of infrastructure within the classrooms. Hence, AESN students do not benefit fully during main lessons. Additionally, in their daily lives, AESN students get only a limited concrete experience of core subjects. There is indeed a difference between making a policy

and turning it into daily practices for teachers, school administrators and local communities. Implementation details may be left for administrations and educators to figure out, effectively leaving the reform process half-way through (Hess, 2013:5). Observing that policies often do not get implemented as planned, or not with the desired outcomes, governments, experts and international organizations have come to acknowledge the need to focus more on implementation processes (Gurría, 2015:6; Wagstaff, 2013:7; Pont, 2008:8; OECD, 2016:9). Challenges to implementing 'Student support Program' include co-ordination issues, inadequacy of organizational resources, qualified teachers and resistance against reforms.

However, the main problem in my work place is that it provides only worksheets based knowledge to AESN students. This is hardly adequate when hands-on and practical work has a high success value in day-to-day life. Qatar has signed the 'United Nations Convention for Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)' on 30th March 2007. In this policy it was clearly aimed to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal opportunity of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. In spite of this policy, in practice it is less effective in my school, therefore it was strongly in favour of promoting 'Student support Program' for AESN students.

In my organization, my responsibilities were to promote Student Support Program (SSP) up to primary level. During my classroom visit and observation, I realized that students are uninterested during the lesson as they had difficulties in the understanding of theoretical concepts. While struggling to provide appropriate teaching strategies to the teachers, I felt this is an interesting topic for my paper as it joins me directly with my professional area. Since, I have the opportunity to gain experience of the practices which are used in Qatari International School classrooms to teach AESN students; I feel it will add some new understanding to enhance my professional skills in order to meet these challenges in future. Another significant rationale for this study was the common perception prevalent in Qatar that AESN students cannot learn in inclusive setup effectively.

The key word of above question is 'Student Support Program.' According to my school policy on student support program (2016- 2017:1), students get support through four programs categorised as 'Student Support Program': Gifted and Talented Program, Special Education Needs, Academic Intervention Program and English Second Language program. The other key word is 'strategies' which are defined by Howley et al. (2003) as structured teaching which are indeed effective. The aim of this study is to find out the effective strategies adopted by teachers in the practice of inclusive education. Some sub-questions I used for this study are:

1. What are school policies for implementing Student Support Program?
2. What are the influencing factors in teaching AESN students?
3. What do teachers plan for a particular lesson of AESN students before taking the class?
4. Which teaching aids and appliances are used frequently to enable learning take place?
5. How do my school teachers teach or what are the strategies/approaches to teach AESN students to learn and understand the particular topic?

The study will provide a 'sense of inescapability' because its aim is to develop and practice innovative ideas in the field of Student Support Program in my school. The study findings will help me to: gain insights and ideas for implementation Student Support Program; obtain effective strategies for teaching AESN students. The findings of this study will be useful for support program professionals; educators; and further research in the relevant field.

2 Literature Review

To analyse my research question, **'Understanding, promoting and implementation of students support program'** in my school, it is important for me to find out what significant works had been done in this field previously. For my Literature Review, I was inspired by Mertens, and McLaughlin, (2005). They suggested the Literature Review provides an essential resource for planning, conducting, interpreting, and reporting research in special education. The approach, which I chose for searching the relevant literature, is also motivated by Bell's (1999) suggestions for splitting the topic into its major components differently; hence, my literature review is split as follows: Student Support program; Gifted and Talented Program, Special education, Academic intervention program and English as a second language program. Teaching strategies and inclusive classrooms are the main components of my research topic.

2.1 Definition of Student Support Program and Related Terminologies

Apart from the definition of Student Support Program, there are many terminologies used for this study, AESN policies, Student Support Team (SST) are some central terms to be used as they are basically linked with Student Support Program.

2.2 Student Support Program

The Student Support Program (SSP) at my school is an additional academic support program which nurtures the students having learning difficulties, disabilities, and cognitive, social and behavioural gap during the school hours. The Student Support Program (SSP) is categorized into four types: - Gifted and Talented Program (GTP), Special Educational Needs (SEN), Academic Intervention Plan (AIP) and English as a second language (ESL).

2.3 Gifted and Talented Program

The Student Support Program document describes Gifted and Talented Program (GTP) as: 'A program designed for students exhibiting higher academic capabilities in the classroom. It is designed to ensure that our most able learners are given the challenge, encouragement and assistance they need to achieve success and to create additional enrichment opportunities for them to develop and demonstrate their abilities. Students referred to this program will pass through a selection process, which consists of academic evidence and an interview with selected students. Students will be assigned extra tasks, such as extension worksheets or, mini-group projects' (SIS- SSP- Doc 1- 18/19:1).

2.4 Special Education Needs

The Student Support Program document defines Special Educational Needs (SEN) as:
'A program designed to accommodate students with special needs in their learning process. Students referred to this program, must have a referral form and a medical document stating classification of disability. After all required information has been gathered (from observations, parent and teacher meetings), students in this program are subject to an individualized education plan (IEP) for each term. The IEP will consist of their goals, objectives and time frame in accordance with their specific needs. Progress will be closely monitored. The pull-out and push- in session(s) will be scheduled according to the student's specific needs.'

2.5 Academic Intervention Plan

'A program designed for those students that need a one-to-one approach to reach the age appropriate academic year level as their peers. Students referred to this program are performing at an alarming readiness level for the age appropriate expected standard, in more than one English instructed subject. For example, they do not have the proper foundation to demonstrate academic capabilities corresponding to the age appropriate year level as their peers. Students will be subject to an academic intervention plan (AIP), which consists of specific subject goal, objectives and time frame in accordance to meet the students' needs. The students' progress will be closely monitored. Pull-out or push-in session(s) will be scheduled according to the students' specific needs.'

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2.8 English as a Second Language

'A program designed for students who are not at the proficiency English level as their corresponding year level. Students in this program will improve their writing, reading, spelling and comprehension skills in English language. They will be assigned to three different levels in accordance to their capabilities. The ESL services will be delivered through pull-out as well as push-in program to meet the needs of the student.'

2.9   Teaching strategies and approaches

Teaching strategies and approaches play an important role in teaching for AESN students. In the context of Qatar, the syllabus must be finished within an academic year. It is a bit difficult for teachers. Nevertheless, in such adverse conditions the teacher should follow some specific teaching strategies in the classroom to cope up with the individual diversity among the students. The Student Support Program Module is, 'an achievable teaching approach designed to help users learn about the students who may need support' (SSP Module, 2016-2017:1).
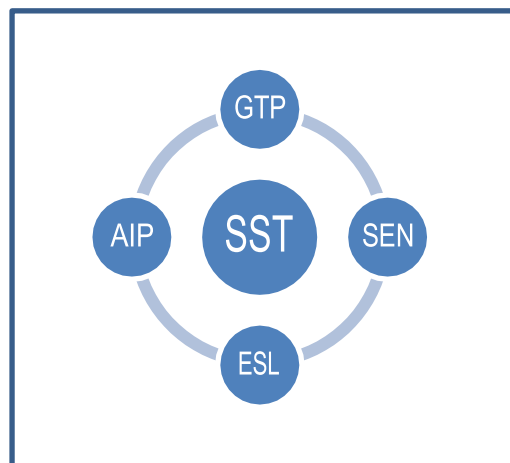

Fig 1. Student Support Program Module

2.10 Inclusive Education

In inclusive education, the inclusive classroom is a place where all students come for the same purpose and they sit together and learn together. Here, not a single child is denied education because of barriers caused by disabilities and 'every child has fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning' (The Salamanca Statement, 1994). Reaching educational access to their neighbouring school is the right of every child. The Salamanca Declaration also directed the participating Governments that they should make the greatest possible effort to remove the barriers in accessing proper education (UNESCO, 2002). Falvey and Givner(2005) describe inclusive schools 'we must create, cherish, and nurture schools that include and effectively educate all student' and it is the school's responsibility 'to ensure that all students have access to meaningful learning'(Falvey and Givner, 2005:59).

2.11 Psycho- Social attitudinal effects on Student who may needs support

The teacher's attitude is very important because it could prove to be a negative barrier toward how they practice with AESN students and it is a very important dimension of the inclusive movement. In inclusive education, teachers have high expectation of AESN students. According to Gottfredson (1986) the lower expectation is the result of cultural and social isolation rather than being labelling as special group status. He further adds that in mainstream schools children in special groups get the opportunity to live and study in a broader peer group and thus their social isolation is reduced. The consequences of these arguments are that in an

inclusive classroom the teacher's' expectation is high. Therefore, to achieve this high expectation they have to adopt effective teaching strategies.

3 Research Methodology

The research methodology enlightens the research questions of the study and the reasons why qualitative approach guides this study. The chapter describes the paradigms, different components of research design, instruments and explains why the case study method was selected for this study and offers details of the problems encountered while following this method and during data collections. Finally, the chapter covers the ethical considerations and limitations of the study. While selecting research questions for this study I considered all the problems that arose during my practice in my school. On the one hand, Lowe says 'your research should also make a contribution to your own personal professional development or contribute to the development of professional practice within your organisation' (Lowe, 2007: 27). On the other hand, Dawson (2002) says that a good research question is one that motivates the researcher in the whole process of the study and retains the researcher's interest in it till the end of the project. While implementing the student support program in my school; I found that implementation of above program was a great challenge for me. Therefore, I selected research questions which are as follows:

'What are the effective strategies for implementation of students support program?'

Paradigm is a path of looking at the world and it is collection of certain philosophical assumptions that guide and direct thinking and action (Mertens, 2005: 7). Furthermore, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) describes paradigm as a 'basic set of beliefs that guide action'. In the field of research, two major paradigms are popular and widely used that is positivism and constructivism. The positivism approach uses the quantitative methods whereas the constructivism supports the qualitative approach. Although, I focused on constructivism for this study, I would like to describe some important facts about positivism. Signing of the United Nations Convention on the right of Person with Disabilities (CRPD) Qatar states that 'Paradigm Shift in attitude and approaches to person with disabilities and the person with disabilities are not viewed as object of charity, medical treatment and social protection; but rather as subjects with rights and its informed consent as well as being active member of society. Due to paradigm shift this convention gives universal recognition to the dignity of person with disabilities (2007:53). So, it is considered very unrealistic to think of people as an object as most part of human behaviour is not measurable by scientific tools.

Qualitative methodology describes mainly four research methods: ethnographic, phenomenon- graphic, grounded theory and case studies. I chose case study for my paper because of the limited amount of time. The research design below involves five steps as suggested by Yin (2003). But for my study I considered four steps which are as follows:

1. Determining and explaining the nature of the research question.
2. Selection of case
3. Procedure of data collection
4. Data collection

For case studies, the four instruments described by Creswell (2007): - interviews, observations, documents, and audio-visual materials. For my study I selected observation,

direct participant observations. The research tool was developed around two unconditional questions, namely 'what are specific strategies for implementations of SSP?' And 'how is this specific strategy most effective'. In qualitative study; classroom observation is an important method for data collecting. Opie (2004) states that 'observation allows the researcher to observe what is actually happing rather than relying on perceptions of what is happening which might result from, say, interviewing'. Observation is most important in the case AESN students during classes because disabilities and learning difficulties pose particular challenges in the environment. It gives opportunities to observe how ASEN students participate during lessons. Above view inspired and I selected participant observation for my study.

An ethical issue is very common in a research. Therefore, this is an important part of study. Robson (2002) gives meaning of ethical he suggested 'you follow a code of conduct for the research which ensures that the interest and concerns of those taking part in, or possibly affected by, the research are safeguarded' (2002: 18). In this study there were some main ethical considerations that guided the whole plan. The main concern was to ensure that the all participants were willing to do voluntary participation without any pressure and they were free to withdraw themselves from the study whenever they wished. Finally, all processes of the study were transparent to the participants and I promised to send a soft copy of findings to them if they were interested.

4 Data-Analysis

4.1 Teaching Approaches

From my point of view teaching is a challenging job but do advocacy of collaborative approaches; as Wiersema's (2000) discussion is that 'collaborative learning is a philosophy of working together, building together, learning together, changing together, and improving together'. Furthermore, 'I think they benefit from one to one work when SST can go and help them individually and quite structured teaching' which is also supported by Literature Review (Page no.-11). I found that physical arrangement of the classes was less structured in such a way that AESN students were neglected. For example, unstructured structured study materials or students friendly furniture. Last but not least, the present research findings revealed the strength of collaborative approaches of GTP, SEN, AIP and ESL (Page no.-12) "a collaborative teaching approach designed to help users learn about the AESN students."

4.2 Some challenging aspects in implementation of SSP program

The study found that Student Support Program has strong theoretical framework. However, the findings show that students faced problems during learning in mainstream classroom. During observation, I found that there is a need of practical implementation of SSP to find how this challenging environment can be improved effectively. Being a coordinator of student support program, I am quite positive that it will be possible to minimise the challenges of AESN students. I found from my experience that teachers should have techniques and willingness to teach the AESN students but they need knowledge and special training. Additionally, the finding shows that AESN students are deprived of the incidental learning from the surrounding environment. Therefore, removal of such barriers would be a major support to minimize challenges faced by AESN students. Puri and Abraham (2004)

described as follows: 'Removing the barriers of the teaching system, by providing facilities related to the curriculum, by the use of modern technology like computers using specialized software; providing awareness, sensitivity and solutions for teachers; removing the barriers of the examination system by providing means of free and fair evaluation of the students' knowledge irrespective of his/her sensory/physical status and removing the barriers of attitude developed due to lack of awareness'(Puri and Abraham, 2004:27). As a coordinator of Student Support Program, I agree that such challenging topics give double responsibility to student support team to give special attention while teaching. In my own professional experiences I find that it is not very difficult to teach AESN students. I have been witness to many of students showing remarkable performances after getting support.

4.3   Inclusion: Aspects of inclusion for AESN students

My own experience as a teacher, I found that teaching AESN students in inclusive classroom was easy. On the contrary, during class observation, I found that the class room teacher as well as the student support team (SST), found it was so hard. The study of Falvey and Givner (2005) also supports my views. Inclusive education is about embracing everyone and making a commitment to provide each student in the community, each citizen in a democracy, with the inalienable right to belong. Inclusion assumes that living and learning together benefits everyone, not just children who are labelled as having a difference'(Falvey and Givner, 2005:55).Personally, I am also in favour of the inclusive education system for AESN students because 'every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning' (The Salamanca Statement, 1994).

4.4   Perception/ Attitude Teachers

Although, mainstream is a challenging teaching concept for teachers who do not have special training, nevertheless, it also depends upon the attitude of the teacher. When I was doing observation, I found teachers had a negative attitude towards teaching students who need support. I believe that 'Everybody has their difficulties. It just happens that the students that you are teaching have difficulties in learning process. When you are teaching, if you can encourage a relationship where the kids are constantly telling you, giving feed back to you what they find difficult – then you start understanding how teaching and learning happens'. Therefore, findings of the present study revealed the strength of positive attitudes.

5   Conclusion

The findings of this study illustrate that AESN students have right to revel equal opportunity in the school. The findings also illustrate how student support team work one to one with them. Additionally, there needs to be a positive attitude of the teachers. Moreover, the finding of this study showed that Students Support Program (SSP) are still challenging for teachers. For teaching AESN students there are some different teaching approaches and strategies which have proved to be effective. The collaborative approach, structured teaching approach, adaptive teaching approach and one to one approach are commonly used teaching strategies. Finally, the finding of this study shows new things such as 'practical implementation' of Student Support Program which is extremely helpful vertical alignment of

whole school. Overall, the finding of this research show those AESN students can be taught in inclusive classrooms with some adaptation in teaching materials, teaching aids and appliances and with the help of the teaching approaches and how important it is for a school to maintain good teaching to enable all their students to achieve good results.

The findings of the study are useful for the teachers who teach AESN students at the same time it may be useful for student support team (SST) themselves. The results may increase their self- confidence in teaching. However, I feel there is still a need for a large scale study on the same topic of 'teaching strategies for students who need support' to teach them that a general theory can be achieved. This research opens the doors to identify the barriers and challenges in teaching AESN students. Hence, challenging topics of this area can be identified and their solutions found with the help of this research. However, I would like to give the following recommendations:

a. Mainstream teachers need more training in teaching in inclusive setup.
b. Head should promote action research as being essential bearing in mind the outcomes which will enable more inclusive teaching for AESN students.

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