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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE IMPACTS OF CO-TEACHING ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS FROM ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES.

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Abstract

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Poor economic backgrounds of special need students pose a huge challenge on the academic performance of these students and it is evident that such students perform poorly than their peers. This literature addresses the impacts of poverty on the academic performance of special needs students and the impacts of co-teaching as a measure of improving the academic performance of special need students from economically disadvantaged communities. The findings indicate that co-teaching has shown positive results on the academic performance of special needs students as well as their social well-being. The paper then concludes that the policy makers, the teachers and the administrators in the education sector should put in place measures that enhance co-teaching in addition to other measures that aim at assisting special need students gain high academic performances.

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Introduction:-

Special needs students are students with special educational needs whose education is usually aided in a manner that addresses their individual differences and requirements. These students have some forms of disabilities that disadvantage them from learning in the same environment and conditions as other students. Co-teaching is an educational environment where two or more teachers collaborate in teaching a group of students (Aliakbari&Nejad, 2013). In technical terms, co-teaching is 'the pedagogical setting where two teachers share their pedagogy, information, and assessment'. However, under the special needs education framework, co-teaching refers to the collaborating of a general education teacher with a special education teacher or a specialist with the aim of jointly delivering instruction to an array of students, including those with disabilities in a manner that is flexible to meet their learning needs (Friend, 2008). An economically disadvantaged community is a community that cannot meet the needs of its members, especially the basic needs. Therefore, a student from an economically disadvantaged family comes from a poor family, which cannot provide the necessities required, by the school for the student to learn effectively. For instance, a student from a low-income family may lack finances to buy school uniforms, books, and other learning materials required by the schools.

This paper analyzes the impact of co-teaching on the academic performance of students with special needs (special needs students) from economically disadvantaged communities. It eventually aims to answer the questions of whether co-teaching is an effective technique of teaching special need students from low-income families by exploring the academic performance of such students. The paper eventually outlines the recommendations for both the stakeholders and policy makers based on the findings on measures that would help improve the academic performance of this group of students.

Background:-

Special needs students are students who are disabled in one way or another and thus require special attention when in the process of learning. These students, apart from either physical or mental challenges, they harbor specific needs as some may have difficulties in learning specific subjects such as literary needs due to dyslexia or dysgraphia, difficulties in grasping special concepts, poor vision, or even intellectual disabilities which may result from poor mental development. Such students require specific unique actions to aid their learning, otherwise their performance both in academics and other co-curricular activities will be below par.

To help this category of students, specific learning strategies must be employed. These strategies can be either organizational, presentation, reading, or motivational, depending on the individual needs (Connell, Campbell, Vickers, Welch, Foley, Bagnall & Hayes, 2010).

Co-teaching:-

Co-teaching is a form of collaboration that has been used in special education for quite some time. Teams have been used to make decisions on the best methods of teaching students with disabilities, and this has included a close working relationship with parents and other stakeholders (Friend & Cook, 2010). Additionally, professionals such as speech-language therapists, counselors, occupational and physiotherapists have been used to assist special educators in helping special need students in the form of collaboration. The inception of the concept of inclusive schooling led to the notion that special education and related services could be offered in the general education setting through partnerships and collaboration with the professional thus delivering the concept of co-teaching.

There are six approaches of co-teaching as discussed below (Friend & Bursuck, 2009)

1. Teaming – both teachers lead a large group through instruction by lecturing, representing opposing views in a debate, illustrating different ways of solving a single problem, among others.
2. One teaches, one observes – in this case, one teacher teaches while the other makes observations of the students and gathers information such as behavior of the students
3. Parallel teaching – the two teachers each take half the class and they present the same material to enhance student participation and foster instructional differentiation
4. One teaches, one assists – in this case, one teacher leads the instruction while the other moves around the class offering assistance to individual students
5. Station teaching – the students are divided into three stations where each teacher teaches at one station and the students work on their own in the third station. This is done in a rotational manner
6. Alternative teaching – in this case, one teacher works with most students as the other works with a smaller group to enhance enrichment, assessment, pre-teaching, and remediation

Effective co-teaching practice requires the input of three vital experts; the general educator, the special educator, and the administrator. The general educator is more concerned with the delivery of the content; the special educator attends the specially designed instruction strategies while the administrator ensures the provision of the necessary requirements that enhance effective co-teaching (Fennick, 2001).

General Impacts of Co-teaching:-

Mastropieri, Scruggs, Graetz, Norlan, Gardizi, and McDuffie (2005) found out that co-teaching of science subject in upper elementary and middle school had great impact, not only in students but also on the teachers. The following are some of the benefits that were brought about by co-teaching.

1. It created an outstanding working relationship between the teachers
2. The teaching teams acted as motivators for their students thus increasing the motivation of students
3. The teaching teams had a hands-on, activity-based approach to instruction, which made the content more concrete to students. This lessened the language and literary demands of tasks. This was more beneficial to the students with disabilities as most of them experience difficulties with language and literary tasks. Research has shown that students with disabilities gain much from hands-on approaches of teaching in contrast to textbook approaches (Mastropieri et al., 1998).
4. The teaching teams were also found to use the most effective instructional skills such as classroom management skills, which include daily review, guided and independent practice activities, and formative review, among others.

5. The teaching teams discussed specific adaptations that were required for students with disabilities for their success. They thus addressed the individual performance of students with disabilities and planned how to handle such students
6. Since the level of content knowledge is different between the co-teachers, the teachers frequently exchanged roles thus ensuring that the students get the content from both teachers from different points of views. The teachers also learned from each other during the teaching regarding the content and its presentation.

Mastropiesri, Scruggs, Graetz, Norlan, Gardizi, and McDuffie (2005) found out that the special education teacher may not have been excellent at presenting the content of some subjects during co-teaching, but her role would be that of an aide, helping in management of the classroom as well as giving individual assistance was equally important in the delivery of instruction. This is, in fact, the role mostly played by special education teachers in secondary schools (Zigmond & Matta, 2004; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002).

The factors that lead to students benefiting from co-teaching include increased attention from teachers (Rice & Zigmond, 2000; Wilson & Michaels, 2006). A flexible grouping model is also another factor that increases the benefits that students derive from co-teaching (Eienman et al., 2011) as well as differentiated instructions and focus on learning strategies (Wilson & Michaels, 2006; Jang, 2006; Pugach & Wesson, 1995).

Impacts of Co-teaching on Student Academic Performance:-

Co-teaching occurs in classes where special needs students are integrated with other students in a general education classroom. This type of teaching is contrary to the traditional historical teaching model where students with disabilities were taught in a pullout instruction to specifically help them meet their IEP goals (Paulsen, 2008).

Research has shown that co-teaching has led to growth in students' academic performance in all subjects. Idol, 2006; Jang, 2006; Scruggs, Mastropieri, McDuffie, 2007; Hang & Rabren, 2009 have all shown that co-teaching have had positive results on the academic performance of students. In their meta-analysis study of co-teaching, Murawski and Swanson (2001) found out that Language and Reading had the highest effect size of 1.59 while math had the lowest of 0.45. However, the average effect size for all the content areas was 0.40 on the student's academic achievement.

Co-teaching has been demonstrated to positively affect the academic performance of students with disabilities. Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009 and Hang & Rabren, 2009, affirm that using special education teachers in in general education settings benefits not only the special needs students but also the other regular students. Theoharis implemented a co-teaching inclusive model in a school and a period of three years, the proficiency score for the school's reading test improved from 50% to 86% while those of the subgroups with students with disabilities increased from 13% to 60% (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009). In another experiment, Hang and Rabren (2009), using a sample of 58 students demonstrated that there was a positive improvement on the academic performance in co-taught classes. Most significantly, special needs students benefited as was shown by the pre and post-test scores based on the Stanford Achievement Test. What is interesting is that the special needs students grew at an average rate equivalent to that of their peers; this is crucial in leveling the gap between special needs students and other students. In another quantitative study by Pugach and Wesson (1995) on 18 students from fifth-grade and the impact of co-teaching on them, it was found out that special need students preferred co-taught classes over being pulled out for supplemental instruction. The special needs students were thus found to have a more positive perception of school and became more motivated to attend school than before.

Impacts of Economic Background on Student Academic Performance:-

Okioga (2013) in a study of the impacts of socio-economic backgrounds on the academic performance of students revealed that families with higher income are keener on the education of their children. The middle-class parents also take an active role in the education of their children while families with lower incomes more often are not keen on the education of their children. This is because families with low socio-economic status more often lack the financial and the educational supports that the families of higher income have. In addition, low-income families may have poor access or may lack the resources that promote and support their children's development and readiness for school. Okioga (2013) assert that poverty leads to lack of resources and leads in limited access to resources that naturally affect the family decisions regarding their children's learning and education.

Even if students from economically disadvantaged communities accessed education, their academic performance would be affected drastically (Helen, 2012). For instance, a poor economic background exposes children to the following,

1. Poor nutrition and thus poor health which naturally translates into poor academic performance in schools
2. Lack of early exposure to rich language which helps in boosting cognitive development
3. The students do not get the enrichment experiences such as after school and summer programs because their families cannot afford.

These three reasons make students from economically disadvantaged students unable to effectively compete with those from affluent families, hence their poor academic performance.

Students with special needs are at a more risk of performing even worse than other students perform if they come from economically disadvantaged communities (Pugach & Wesson, 1995). These students first will lack a favorable encouraging home environment and may thus be burdened with home affairs such as neglect and rejection from other family members. In addition, most parents with special needs children will not see the need of 'spending much money' on such children because of their nature. This notion plays a part even in wealthy families but is made worse by poverty. Students with disabilities require extra care, which would mean additional expenses, for instance, reading aids, hearing aids, and specific books among other special requirements. This may seem a burden to families that are economically disadvantaged, and thus, a child will be sent to school without some basic facilities that enhance learning.

Students from low-income families do suffer lower self-esteem due to their social background; special needs students are not an exception and in fact, poverty doubles their problems (Austin, 2001). Therefore, will all these, special needs students from poor backgrounds, if not attended to with utmost care will continually suffer poor academic performance.

The role of co-teaching in bridging the economic and special needs barriers:-

Research has shown that students who are co-taught in classrooms tend to develop better relationships with each other and with their instructors (Dieker, 2001). The increased interaction that the students are exposed to in a general education setting gives opportunities to special needs students to be at a standard level with their peers, forming friendships. This makes the students with disabilities feel as though they are the same with the others while the other students also learn to accept these special needs students. The relationships built in this case blur the impacts of both disability and economic background by keeping the students at an equal social level.

Co-teaching leads to the development of learning communities in the classroom thus promoting a safe, positive environment where students accept the physical differences as well as the economic differences through formation of quality friendships (Dieker, 2001; Austin, 2001).

For a long time, students with special needs have felt disconnected to their peers because of the separation that were present in the structures of their classes. Nevertheless, through co-teaching, these students have been allowed to receive instructions in the general education setting and this has enabled them to benefit emotionally (Scruggs et al., 2007; Hang & Rabren, 2009). Apart from improving their abilities, their self-esteem and self-confidence is increased. It is important to note that a special needs student from a low-income family suffers from lower self-esteem and poor self-confidence.

Conclusion:-

From the analysis given in this literature, it is evident that special needs students require special attention from both their teachers and other stakeholders. Additionally, it has been shown that the economic background of a special need student affects his/her learning in one way or another such that students from affluent families find it easy to learn while those from low-income families lack both material and psychological stamina to effectively learn, which eventually translates into poor performance. Co-teaching has been found to be a productive technique that increases student learning, and its effects are evident in the students' academic performance. Most research has supported this fact, and the reasons have been found to revolve around improved instructional practices in the classroom and better support for the special needs students. It is also important to note that co-teaching has a major role in the social development of students, especially those from disadvantaged economic backgrounds. Therefore, it can be concluded that co-teaching is an effective way of teaching, not only special need students but also other students from disadvantaged economic backgrounds. It is one of the teaching methods that if implemented would go a long way in bridging the gap between special needs students and other students, and more specifically, uplifting the

special needs students from poor backgrounds to feel like other students. This will at the end help in improving their academic performance.

Recommendations:-

In the view of the analysis given in this paper, the following recommendations are given,

1. The policymakers should enact policies that should favor co-teaching, and the education managers should be trained to support and lead the implementation of co-teaching in their institutions
2. The government should increase its measures to identify and thus support the special needs students, especially those from economically disadvantaged communities. This is crucial because some special needs students from low-income families are neglected and may not be in a position to receive the support from the government and other NGOs

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